

# “Quid Pro Quo”: The Czech Folklore Revival Movement in the Light of Totalitarian Cultural Policy

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## Abstract

The paper deals with the transformation of society and culture in totalitarianism through the example of the Czech folklore revival movement between 1948 and 1989. While describing the main objectives of communist cultural policy, the paper observes the reasons for the mass development of folk ensembles in the 1950s, the gradual transformations to their activity, and the philosophy behind it. The degree of cooperation between folk ensembles and political power, as well as the exploitation of these troupes to promote the communist regime, was varied. Politically-engagé performances by such ensembles and their participation in events organized by the totalitarian state apparatus have resulted in many Czech people adopting a negative attitude towards the folklore revival movement as a whole. In the fact most members of these ensembles were not motivated by politics – for many of them, this leisure activity was an escape from reality to the romantically viewed world of folk tradition.

## Key words

Folklore revival movement, folk ensembles, totalitarianism, communist cultural policy, transformation of tradition, leisure, Czech Republic

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The discussion of how cultures and societies function as systems, and of the individual's role in such systems, has been underway in ethnology and sociocultural anthropology basically since the beginning of the academic formation of these fields. The purpose of the present study is to show how it is possible to consider this dichotomy in the context of the Czech cultural environment under a regime of totalitarianism, using the example of the phenomenon of what was called the folklore movement.<sup>1</sup>

The beginnings of the intentional, staged presentation of folk culture in the Czech environment date to the late 19th century. The ethnological literature today is comparatively rich in terms of its findings as to what contributed to forming the study of folklorism in the 1960s and is especially rich regarding the intensification of that study after 1989, when ethnology itself developed into a modern science of cultures and societies, mapping a substantially broader framework than just that circumscribed by the culture of "the folk" as traditionally theorized.

During what would later be called the First Czechoslovak Republic, the folklore movement can be related above all to the Slovácko circles (*slovácké krúžky*) and Moravian Wallachia circles (*valašské krúžky*) that existed in Moravia, to the *Baráčník* associations in Bohemia, or to the many festivities that profited themselves according to the pattern of the programs that were related to the preparation and realization of the 1895 Czechoslovak Ethnographic Exhibition (*Národopisná výstava československá*) – what was performed there were selected pieces of folk dance and music culture as well

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1 This study is the output of a grant task that uses the method of oral history as its main research method as well as the study of official and unofficial pictorial and written sources (for more, see Stavělová 2017 – cf. also the main literature on this subject, both domestic and international). Qualitative field research among selected folk ensembles on the territories of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia is still ongoing; this study, therefore, draws from just some of those findings. The research sample within the framework of the above-mentioned grant includes municipal folklore ensembles from all over the Czech Republic, and collectives were chosen especially for the longevity of their traditions. At least two interviews are always held with eyewitnesses from each ensemble: One is about the eyewitness's life story, and the other(s) are semi-structured interview(s) targeting the specific functioning of the ensembles, especially the personal perspective of each respondent on the motivation for their activity, the function of the ensemble in their own lives, the influence of this hobby on their personal and professional lives, their opinions of other ensembles, their assessment of the context of politics prior to 1989, etc. The research sample includes the broadest possible spectrum of respondents with regard to age, sex, and their function in the ensemble (dancers, musicians, regular members, managers). Materials stored in the archives of these ensembles or of the individual respondents are also studied as part of the research.

as folk ceremonies or customs. Such festivities were frequently intertwined with the activities of the broadest possible range of civic associations, whether those organized for physical education or under the auspices of political parties (such as *Orel*, *Sokol*, the Agrarian Youth or Republican Youth units, the Association of Rural Youth – *Sdružení venkovské omladiny*) commemorating memorial days or events, or such festivities were the embryonic forms of the festivals that exist today and of the ethnographic regions that were forming (e.g., *Valašský rok* – the Moravian Wallachia Year, *Hanácký rok* – the Haná Year). While many of these activities were about conserving the culture of folk tradition and presenting it to the general public, the contextual character of these activities was frequently either political or religious and served to promote interests that were utilitarian.<sup>2</sup>

The culture that is called *folk*, once educated people started taking an interest in it, has figuratively fulfilled functions that are symbolic for different societal strata. Culture considered *rural* has its roots in the European environment as early as the Enlightenment, becoming the ideal, inspirational model of pre-Romanticism and Romanticism. Its aesthetic and social functions, both of its artefacts that were material and of its manifestations of a spiritual nature, were applied most prominently to the use of folk culture, and basically such tendencies can be traced through various modifications over the last two centuries. The aesthetic and representational functions of traditional folk culture came to the fore as more and more changes were made to its patterns, which lost both their content as originally conceived as well as the everyday function of their expression. Although the bearers of these functions did relate them to their identities, whether local or regional, with the arrival of the folklore movement as an organized phenomenon, this connection gradually weakened, as the conditions for its development were mainly urban and, as a consequence of the significant transfer of expressions of folk culture into environments that were staged, they completely eventually lost their original point. It cannot be claimed, of course, that this development was everywhere so straightforward. The city and the countryside and the difference between them was also demonstrated by the way in which expressions of traditional folk culture were used and how such transmissions were perceived – the countryside consolidated, essentially, its identities that were local and regional through these expressions, preserving them in part, while in bigger cities the emergence of the folklore movement *en masse* after the Second World War meant such an opportunity did not exist. Added to this was ideological pressure, which

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2 Cf. the mottos of the associations and festivals in the 1997 publication *Od folkloru k folklorismu* [From Folklore to Folklorism].

intensified during the 1950s in particular. Culture and society as a whole were affected by this pressure, but the image of the *culture of the people*, or rather *folk culture*, was distorted by this pressure quite strongly.

There is an apt reflection by Václav Černý, a historian of literature, on “the people” as a crucial concept in Marxist philosophy:

*“...Herder’s and Rousseau’s people [...] is not at all the same as Marx’s people, in which they are reflected. Rousseau and Herder, in their philosophies of history and culture, idealized and considered as a model their folk peers or recent forebears, the villagers or peasants of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. [...] This is a being who is genuinely natural, tied to nature, ‘unspoiled’ by the city and society after all, bound to the native clay in a relationship of vassaldom, belonging to the sovereign and to God. [...] Marx’s ‘people’ is a new historical arrival, the industrial, urban proletariat, landless, born of the Baroque country peasant of the previous age, but rejected by and uprooted from their native villages.*

*What do such people have in common with the people of Rousseau, with the Romantic people? Nothing. However, Marx simply transferred onto such people all of the ideal qualities of the Romantic people of Rousseau, the pre-industrial country peasant: A ‘people’ was born that was new, other, Marx’s [...].” (Černý 1992: 577–578)*

After 1948, therefore, folk culture was considered a “natural” symbol of the culture of working people from the perspective of the emerging ideology of Marxism-Leninism, a symbol that of course had to be developed and supported. After all, circumstances in society had predetermined such a development. Jan Dobeš, a historian, reports that the power of the state was strengthened in Europe after the Second World War, and even more so in the countries of what was called the Eastern Bloc:

*“Attention to the individual was (for a long time) replaced with collectivist values. However, while the nation had been the central collectivist value before and during the war, after the war the people suddenly took the nation’s place. Individuals should be subordinated to the interests of the people, and the state should also serve the welfare of the people.” (Dobeš 2013: 193–194)*

The attention of the ideologues of totalitarianism was thus focused on the associations and groups operating in the Czech context in this spirit – activi-

ties connected with folk traditions, their maintenance, and their presentation (especially folk songs, dances, costumes, and some festivities linked to the church-agricultural calendar of the life of the people). At the same time, however, the ties to a traditional folk culture strongly permeated by Christianity and the conservative attitudes of the members of the interwar folklore movement represented a platform that did not correspond to the political propaganda of the time. The creation of a completely “new” such movement, based on principles that were significantly different, became the goal.

Along with the changes in lifestyle after the Second World War – related not just to the specific conditions for life in the countries under Soviet influence, but also to broader changes in European society – room for recreation opened up in an unprecedented way. In Czech postwar society, certain developmental tendencies applied to how free time was spent that were affected by a number of factors, from ameliorating the consequences of the wartime conflict, to changing the economy’s structure, to shortening the workday in the second half of the 1950s (Franc – Knapík 2013: 15–27). The Czechoslovak Communist Party’s (KSC) ideological influence went hand in hand with emphasizing collective formats for spending one’s free time and participating in the movement of what was called the artistic creativity of the people<sup>3</sup> (ibid.: 27–28), which was being built according to the Soviet model. The flowery, stereotypical phrases of the period press presented the principles of that model:

*“A remarkable feature of our people artistic creativity is that it is inextricably linked with the work and life of the people, imbued with the enthusiasm of the struggle for the victory of communism. The gifted members of amateur theatre groups, the national singers, musicians, dancers and artists are at the same time the best labourers, the masters of socialist work in the factories, the collective farms, and the Soviet offices. People’s artistic creativity is an organic part of all Soviet art. Both professional and popular artistic creativity face essentially the same goals and tasks of the ideological education of the masses through artistic means.”* (“Cultural awareness work in the village”, cited in Šafařík 1951: 4)

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3 This term was applied not just to ensembles performing music and dance folklore, but also in general to all amateur choirs or dance, music and theatre troupes. The later, more precise term of “leisure artistic activity” (*zájmová umělecká činnost*) was then introduced by Milan Bartoš, director of the Centre for Cultural and Educational Activity (ÚKVČ), an educational institution, during the 1960s, according to long-time employee Eva Rejšková.

The Movement of so called people's artistic creativity (*lidová umělecká tvořivost* – LUT) was therefore to be fully controlled and directed through party ideologues and trained adult educational workers. As for collectives concentrating on presenting elements of folk culture, support was intended for those developing what were called *progressive* people's traditions, freed from everything "regressive" (i.e., connected to the Christian faith) and "decadent" ("sickly-sweet dirges yearning for the good old days"): They were meant to present "the immensely optimistic culture of the people" (Havlíček 1951: 5). The building of a "fair" new order had been declared by the propaganda of totalitarianism, which required mindsets that were "new" – and people who were "new". In the communist ideologues' eyes, these "new people" were, in particular, the youth, and it is they who were primarily targeted: The exploitability of their attitudes and opinions, which were radical and conditioned by their age and inexperience, as well as their manipulability, had already been tested in the early 20th century by the dictatorships of the Soviet Union and then Fascism. The goals of the communist apparatus are very well illustrated by the words of the then-Information and Public Enlightenment Minister, Václav Kopecký, published as part of the Soběslav's Cultural Education Plan:

*"The great expansion of the Youth Creativity Competition shows what noble ambition and what beautiful impulses can be stimulated in our youth. Therefore, let there not be one boy or girl, not one young person in the city or in the countryside who will not be captivated by the mighty movement of these brilliant and promising youth who, under the banner of the Czechoslovak Youth Union, have joined the front ranks of the builders of socialism and are imbued with fervent feelings of conscious socialist patriotism and proletarian internationalism! Give all your support to people's artistic creativity! Work non-violently, but consistently, to cleanse the voluntary associations of the conservative and reactionary elements and to gradually transform these associations into the cultural and artistic ensembles of the Revolutionary Trade Union Movement, the Czechoslovak Youth Union, and the Unified Agricultural Cooperatives!"* (Kopecký 1951: 1)

Under the slogan of the struggle against the "dark intentions of the imperialists and domestic reactionary elements," a mass platform was built, the backbone of which was dozens of youth collectives; a very important part of these LUT ensembles were the folk music groups, which in their day were called "folk song and dance ensembles" (*soubory lidových písní a tanců*). Regardless of their domestic, longstanding tradition, the model for these ensembles was meant to be (and became so in part for some time) the Soviet ensembles; the very term "ensemble" was also taken from there (cf. Pavlicová – Uhlíková 2008a: 195).

## Ensemble life, or, is the Soviet Union our greatest model?

*“The Soviet Union is an example for us in everything. [...] We will also learn from the Soviet masters of culture. [...] For what most characterizes the Soviet masters of culture is their great respect for the culture created by the people, which they also see as a never-ending source of the realism, wealth, beauty and truthfulness of life, and on the basis of the culture that has been built by the people for centuries, they will be able to create completely new, excellent works [...].”* (Rejchrtová 1951: 6)

Whether dozens of similar declarations meant what they said, or whether they were the compulsory “appurtenances” of articles published at the time and were perceived by their authors as a “necessary evil”, would be difficult to discover through this current research. Many eyewitnesses are no longer alive, and not all of them might be able to face the “misdeeds of their youth”. In any case, the ideological, official pressure upon society was very strong. Only in recent years have the first synthesizing evaluations of this time appeared which, already with a certain distance, map this critical period, including in connection with the development of folkloristics and ethnology in general – which, of course, was also reflected in the folklore movement at certain moments.<sup>4</sup> The resolution of the first national folklore conference in Liblice in 1953 is an example of the connection of the communist ideology with insights from professionals that penetrate both the practical and the theoretical spheres of this endeavour. One of the points in that resolution reads as follows:

*“Ensure that people’s creativity consultancies deal with the systematic collection of new and, where appropriate, traditional material in all regions and hand over the collected material to the People’s Creativity Headquarters (Ústředí lidové tvořivosti). [...] Scientific institutions will assist the people’s creativity with collecting this material in terms of methodology and theory.”* (Resoluce 1953: 100)

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4 Jůnová Macková, A. 2015. Státní ústav pro lidovou píseň a Československá akademie věd 1952–1953, *Český lid*, 102: 419–435; Woitsch, J. – Jůnová Macková, A. a kol. 2016. *Etnologie v zúženém prostoru*, Praha: Etnologický ústav AV ČR or Válka M. a kol. 2016. *Od národopisu k evropské etnologii. 70 let Ústavu evropské etnologie Filozofické fakulty Masarykovy univerzity*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, or Petrání, J. 2015. *Filozofové dělají revoluci. Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy během komunistického experimentu (1948–1969–1989)*. Praha: Nakladatelství Karolinum.



When studying period sources, especially publications focused on the field of the LUT (e.g., *Lidová tvořivost* [Peoples' Creativity], *Taneční listy* [Dance Journal], *Klub* [Club], *Kulturní práce* [Cultural Labour]), the reader very soon encounters a dichotomy in many of their pieces: On the one hand there are the ideological proclamations, and on the other hand, there are expertly-founded articles from the ethnographic and folkloristic fields of the time, research requiring not just knowledge of the terrain (i.e., the folk traditions of the relevant ethnographic region), but also a firm grasp of how to interpret this folk dance and music, including a high-level understanding of the choreography and musical arrangements of the material being processed.

For amateur artists to collaborate and intermingle with professionals, which was presented as “an important convenience of the new social order” and as a way to “come closer to the realization of the beautiful idea of communism – where every worker is to become an engineer and **every worker an artist**” [emphasis added by the authors of the present study] (Laudová 1954: 14), it was recommended that they take direct inspiration from ensembles in the USSR and the way such ensembles rehearsed and performed onstage:

*“The discipline, work discipline, the closest of collective relationships, the mutual relationships among all the ensemble members, as well as the method of work and way of training, can be a model even for ensembles that do not perform Soviet dances.”* (Čížková 1954: 227)

On the basis of the Soviet model, what was required from such shows was: **artistry** (a high level of choreographic and musical stylization and performances bordering on the virtuosic); **respect for folk traditions** (to be more precise, for those defined by the term “progressive”), their comprehension and their development; and last but not least, the creation of **new art**:

*“...the people participate in artistic creativity in the folk sense, and their life must be portrayed in new dances. This is the new man, with a new worldview, a new sensibility, and a new relationship to his surroundings. Each event of importance in the life of the Soviet people is celebrated through dance and song. Fulfilling tasks in factories and kolkhozes [collective farms] are reasons to dance together. Let's recall just those dances whose subject matter is contemporary, as we've seen from the ensembles performing in our country (The Alexandrov Ensemble, the Piatnicky Song Ensemble, The Moiseyev Dance Ensemble), the Tanec Rudoarmějců [Dance of the Red Army Soldiers], the*



*Svatba na kolchoze* [Kolkhoz Wedding], *the Mládežnická veselice* [Youth Fiest] *and others.*” (Čížková 1954: 220)

The Soviet model, therefore, in the case of ensembles performing folk material, meant three specific targets were being fulfilled, two of which we can perceive as developments of the folklore revival movement in the following years that were logical. These were the folk material-based, onstage productions on the one hand, and on the other, folk traditions as a subject of study, field trips to meet the folk dancers, musicians and singers who were the last of their kind. Both aspects of this activity had a longstanding tradition in Czechoslovakia and both had developed without any influence from Soviet ensembles. However, the question is how quickly, in what direction, and with what kind of outcomes they had developed. What influenced them was the absolutely basic method for this work that was accented by the Soviet ensembles, and for that reason they were also influenced by the domestic ideological methods that were required and in which they were trained. This was about creations that were engagé, new, and political, and they appeared mostly in the composition of folk songs that were new – a folk music format with content that was new because it was socialist – as well as through the conception of dance numbers or entire suites processing subject matter such as economic progress in rural areas, agricultural cooperatives being established, combating both domestic and foreign enemies, the happy life of peacetime, the building of a socialist republic, celebrating the regime and its representatives, and songs about working in the army, in factories, or in the mines.<sup>5</sup> What became emblematic were ensemble set pieces about cooperative harvests or weddings, as well as set pieces about partisan struggle during the Second World War.<sup>6</sup>

For example, a former member of the Hradišťan folk ensemble recalled the sensitive 1950s:

*“Well, we had to do that stuff, otherwise we could never have succeeded, and what was stupid was that Anežka Gorlová put it together*

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5 Cf. e.g., Mišurec, Z. 1954. *Veselo, muziko, ešte lepší bude. Práce v lidové písni*. Praha: Naše vojsko; Volavý, V. [1957]. *Sborník písní lidových autorů gottwaldovského kraje*. Gottwaldov: Krajský dům osvěty v Gottwaldově; Burlasová, S. 1980. *Ej, přišli sme, přišli sme na pole družstevné*. Bratislava: Příroda.

6 The partisan was meant to replace that favourite representative of the struggle against the feudal lords, the brigand. Such persons had nevertheless been tolerated by the governing powers as “fighters for social justice”.

7 Anežka Gorlová (1910–1993), the most famous author of what were called the new folk songs. Cf. e.g., *Od folkloru k folklorismu* 1997: 33.

*and she always had some verses from Stalin in there, I don't know, all kinds of stuff. It was impossible not to play that stuff, that would never have worked. Well, gradually we began leaving that stuff out of our set lists, gently, until we got into folk music that was pure, and then we said: 'Now we don't want anything of that sort ever again, we want to do folk music that is pure, the way it used to be'."*<sup>8</sup>

Maryna Úlehlová, a member of a troupe that joined one of the Brno-based military ensembles in the 1950s, gave a similar testimony:

*"... but then they decided in the Army garrison house that we needed more than ethnography, so fine, yes to the ethnography, but we also needed an idea, and we should not begin rehearsing until that creative – what was her name? – Anežka [Gorlová] was there. Yes, well, so now we were supposed to sing 'Hey, we were poor, oh, and we are comrades, and we will go together, oh, with the Soviet Union...' - well, at that moment, something in me rebelled and I thought 'This is going too far, this can't be'."*<sup>9</sup>

Hand in hand with the development of ideologized work, however, was new dance work inspired by the folk tradition, or at least seemingly so. In their day, these ensembles therefore reflected not just on tradition as a past experience, but also more and more often on ideas about tradition (Hill – Bithell 2014: 12). This was related, among other things, to the above-mentioned demand for artistry (proclaimed both in the phrase 'people's artistic creativity' and in the later designation 'leisure artistic activity'). In the case of Czechoslovak folk ensembles, such artistry was a bigger problem than was respect for the traditions upon which this movement had *de facto* grown. The Soviet collectives could be (partially) partnered initially only with such bodies as Vít Nejedlý's Army Art Ensemble, the Czechoslovak State Song and Dance Ensemble, Josef Vycpálek's Song and Dance Ensemble, Lúčnica, or the The Slovak State Traditional Dance Company (*Slovenský ľudový umelecký kolektív – SLUK*).<sup>10</sup> Most amateur ensembles, with some exceptions, worked in a different way: They did not try to stylize the folk traditions with the intention of authorially, artistically expressing a specific idea, but performed their dances and folk music in a simple manner, without any kind of directorial line that was more thought-out.

8 Male respondent (\* 1926), interview of 9 November 2017, Staré Město.

9 Female respondent (\* 1935), interview of 17 October 2017, Brno.

10 On the trips made by some of these collectives to the USSR, cf. Čížková 1954: 228.

For example, the Dolina folk ensemble from the town of Staré Město near Uherské Hradiště was born in 1956 and its beginnings were connected to local tradition:

*“So, they were still dancing in those heavy folk costumes, and I know that they did it more or less like it had been done here, they already had some colloquial numbers – they did ‘Easter Whipping’ (šlaháčka), ‘Spring in the Village’ (jaro na dědině), they did the colloquial ones, but more or less around Staré Město or from the Staré Město area. It was like how, in a hamlet, the year would be spent.”<sup>11</sup>*

However, within the framework of the competitions for LUT troupes and the folklore festivals, these collectives did meet each other, influenced each other, and gradually adopted similar ways of presenting themselves and working.

*“...at that time we attended these competitions for creativity among youth, they were held every year, and there were more and more such displays, [...] there one could see how each ensemble was working with the material available, and what the performers – both dancers and musicians – were actually doing.”<sup>12</sup>*

In an environment where distinctive ensembles were being formed in urban areas, as was the case, for example, in the above-mentioned district of Uherské Hradiště, they adopted each others’ models. The building of the repertoire happened in a similar way:

*“So, like, I don’t know who organized this, but it’s known that, for example, the Lhota ensemble, the Hradišťan ensemble, the Dolina ensemble, the Kunovjan ensemble – they were all the same, they danced the csárdás with kicks, they all sang the same songs, they adapted the choreography a little, but they were almost, almost the same. So they had been travelling to those assemblies, the dance ones, where they learned some of those steps.”<sup>13</sup>*

Only the sets performed by ensembles from what were called “folklore-vibrant regions”, i.e., regions with still-surviving remnants of folk culture, remained significantly different, especially in Moravia and Silesia (the

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11 Female respondent (\* 1951), interview of 21 November 2017, Staré Město.

12 Female respondent (\* 1937), interview of 19 July 2017, Vsetín.

13 Female respondent (\* 1951), interview of 21 November 2017, Staré Město.

Hornácko region, Moravian Wallachia, the Těšín region). In some regions, ensembles managed to partially revitalize folk traditions, but they quite frequently did so with the use of their own inventions and by drawing inspiration from elsewhere (the Kyjov area, the Uherský Brod area, the Strážnice area etc.). In the case of Moravia, the position of the Slovácko Circle in Brno is also well known, where a number of the figures from the Moravian folk music movement who would go on to become outstanding performers acquired their knowledge.<sup>14</sup> To this day, these people are perceived not just as authorities, but also as bearers of tradition, even though they only became such on the basis of their work in the field of the folklore revival movement. Ensemble members thus gradually became, in the eyes of the public, connoisseurs of these traditions and the rightful successors to them, either because of their actual contact with the authentic bearers of the earlier traditions (let's recall here that many ensembles took field trips to study traditions; wrote down dances and songs; learned how folk musicians play; and created what were called "programs of treasures" as part of folklore festivals, where authentic bearers performed these surviving traditions), or because of their charismatic personalities or exceptional performance skills (regardless of whether they had actually followed folk traditions locally and regionally, or had reconstructed them, or had – quite frequently – invented them out of whole cloth). In addition, their position was strongly shored up by the media, which devoted a relatively significant part of the broadcasting schedule to folk music and *de facto* co-created a number of those who were called folk music "legends" (Jožka Severin, Jarmila Šuláková, Jožka Černý and others). A certain paradox arose, therefore, whereby the media, which was guarded ideologically and quite limited, aided the development of the folk music movement, in many cases creating opportunities of self-realization for figures who could not otherwise easily have found a place for themselves in the official world of the time.

### **The aims of the apparatus of totalitarianism and its ways of delivering on them**

In 1950, the Centre for the People's Creativity was established, and at the end of that same year, all associations were abolished by law and then immediately transferred to the platform of the mass organizations working mainly within the ROH (Revolutionary Trade Union Movement) clubs in state enterprises – i.e., under the firm leadership of the political class. That

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14 Cf. e.g., Krist, Jan Miroslav. 1970. *Historie slováckých krúžků a vznik souborů lidových písní a tanců na Slovácku. K vývoji některých forem druhé existence folklóru*. Praha: Ústřední dům lidové umělecké tvořivosti.

same year, what was called “adult educational care”, under which until then the functioning of amateur associations, including folk music ensembles, had fallen, was integrated into the remit of the National Committees, and Educational Commissions were established (Jírový 2005: 118-121). Guidelines were issued for the activities of these associations and educational workers were trained to ensure that the LUT ensembles worked within the framework of established cultural policy, which meant completing three basic tasks: Each ensemble had to establish a clear, firm, cultural-political line to enable it “to fulfil all the tasks that the building of socialism sets it.” The ensemble was to create only such art forms as would “clearly, fully express” this paramount task. Ensembles were supposed to become familiar with the method of socialist realism and to project it into their own artistic activity; ensembles were supposed to take care of renewing folk creativity throughout the broadest possible range of societal strata, to develop new forms of folk entertainment, and to take charge of transferring their experience to less advanced ensembles; the ensembles were supposed to process their own experiences (carry out a “critical self-evaluation” of their work); and folk ensembles especially were tasked with collecting, categorizing (in the sense of distinguishing between “appropriate” and “inappropriate” folk output) and processing folkloristic material (cf. Bonuš 1951: 13).

Within the adult education system structure, the ensembles were evaluated and then were educated in different ways, as can be read in various reports:

*“The Regional Advisory Board for Folk Song and Dance started the first evening of regional training for ensembles and groups performing folk dance and song on 18. XI of this year [1953] in the school at Matiční Street No. 5 in Ostrava. During the preparation of the training, the Regional Advisory Board drew on experience from earlier regional trainings (held at dormitories), as well as experience from the course of the artistic creativity competition for the people this year.*

*During the evaluation of the district rounds and regional shows, we realized that most of the ensembles in our region have already dealt with their initial tasks (acquiring familiarity with traditional works and mastering them well) and that it will be necessary to train their leaders for further work with folk dance, i.e., to develop folk dances. That is why we focused the training (especially the second part) mainly on questions of choreography and stage work in general.”* ([Podešvová] 1953: 128)

Already in those years it was clear that the folklore revival movement was a conglomerate of collectives that at first glance seemed similar, but were frequently quite different in reality: The differences were both in the area of **ensemble members' origins in social terms** (city versus countryside, workers, farmers, soldiers, students, members of the intelligentsia); **their religion** (especially in the Moravian agricultural regions, the number of believers was high throughout the period of Communist Party rule; higher percentages of atheists were associated with the industrial locations in such regions; part of the intelligentsia also claimed to be atheists); **in relation to traditional folk culture** (some collectives preserved and developed the traditional folk culture of previous generations, while other ensembles – mainly urban ones – operated without direct experience of the primary functions of folk culture); and in the **goals of their work** (not just the conscious preservation of folklore and its transmission versus its artistically staged stylization, but also, for example, representing the specific founder of a group, or performing folk dance and music as engag  entertainment).

Interviews with members of these folk troupes show that religious beliefs, social differences, and political convictions in particular had no place in the rehearsal room:

*“Somehow we never discussed [politics]. Within the ensemble, politics wasn't much discussed, it was under the auspices of that Slov cek,<sup>15</sup> who held it together on the external side of things, and the ensemble essentially did folk material... somehow any influences that were political didn't work on us. The fact that we toured those, I don't know, election rallies, or that there was dancing at them, we considered a matter of course, because one could charge money for it at that time, so probably everybody was doing it in those days.”<sup>16</sup>*

*“Well, it's possible that some people who never were members of those ensembles and never experienced the atmosphere there could have considered it to be something like ‘Well sure, you see, they're quite involved in politics’, but that's not what it was like, we were glad to get together [...], one did not discuss politics there. We were obliged to participate in those events because if we didn't, then the ensemble couldn't exist.”<sup>17</sup>*

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15 Jan Slov cek (1921–2012), leader of the Dolina ensemble in Star  M sto.

16 Male respondent (\* 1952), interview of 21 November 2017, Star  M sto.

17 Female respondent (\* 1937), interview of 17 October 2017, Brno.

Eyewitnesses quite frequently say an ensemble was a “second family” for them, that strong friendships were formed there, and that they spent the “most beautiful years” of their lives there:

*“Otherwise we had a good group there, a lot of friends, and we always looked forward just to meeting and going somewhere together, and one could say that we’ve kept at it to this day, because we still meet every week with that group, we go on vacation together, and we go for bike rides every Sunday afternoon, so, like, the friendship survived the ensemble, we get together every New Year’s Eve and we take vacations together.”*<sup>18</sup>

Their memories also reflect the fact that such people were able to make a lot of sacrifices in order to pursue this hobby:

*“... one’s family also suffered from this somewhat, because actually there were quite a few of us with children, every trip fell on a holiday, and there were a lot of those trips. Otherwise, in addition to the fact that we toured the country in the 1950s, our organizer was very capable [...] it was up to 80 performances a year, trips lasting even more than a week sometimes [...], to say nothing of the fact that the time simply required that those ensembles take priority over many other matters, the ensemble was simply sent to some such meeting or trip or celebration, ceremonies, the fact that the ensemble had an obligation to go there and perform solved everything.”*<sup>19</sup>

However, when obtaining benefits for one’s own troupe (financial support, performances, places on tours), politics was the tool that was used – which collective was most engagé, which best fulfilled the tasks set by party ideologues, who had personal relationships with party functionaries, and the very membership of the leaders of these troupes in the Communist Party came into play, as did the extent of their activities in this area:

*“Well, so, yes, one performed [...] I don’t know, at electoral rallies. We had, during one year, maybe 70 such performances, like when the meetings for MDŽ [International Women’s Day] were coming to an end and I don’t know, all that stuff they used to do, passing the flags and all those events we visited. We drove to Luhačovice –*

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18 Male respondent (\* 1952), interview of 21 November 2017, Staré Město.

19 Female respondent (\* 1937), interview of 19 July 2017, Vsetín.



*no, to Ostrožská Nová Ves – we always went there every Friday for a month to perform for spa patients. However, sometimes there were such pressures that it was necessary to arrange an immediate performance, some gentlemen arrived and were in Velehrad, for example, in a [wine] cellar, one simply had to go there and it had to be arranged, there was no turning back, one couldn't just refuse. There must have been – I know we were at such events more than once, from the Prime Minister, beginning at Javořina, where the Defence Minister had some minister from Romania there – well, such events of all kinds of a political nature happened, that's how it was then, that's how it went.”<sup>20</sup>*

Even though production quality was always a very important, monitored aspect – a low-quality ensemble could hardly expect to travel, because the level of representativeness was as important to the totalitarian cultural apparatus as the folk group's loyalty – some ensembles (even those at a lower level of performance) travelled abroad more than others. It is not easy to untangle the network of relationships or the possible clientelism involved in the privileging of such ensembles. In the eyewitnesses' recollections, the activities of their own group are emphasized in a more positive light, as is the collectives' rivalry, a natural outcome of some acquiring advantages in the context of a society that was unfree:

*“It flowed more from the leaders, on the one hand, who were of course in a different political position, and on the other hand from the rivalry, when not every ensemble got to go on those tours. It was chosen randomly, so whoever was in power then, as they say, promoted his own group somewhere, which didn't make for good blood between us, I think.”<sup>21</sup>*

*“[...] that was mainly done so we could travel abroad [Authors' Note: engagé material in the repertoire], because they were very careful about that, the ensemble must be labelled as socialist, and we said ‘So what, one poem about Stalin will be written and that's it.’ That got us on the road.”<sup>22</sup>*

What would today be described as managerial skill, however, of course had political undertones in a totalitarian society. The perception of this

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20 Female respondent (\* 1951), interview of 21 November 2017, Staré Město.

21 Male respondent (\* 1952), interview of 21 November 2017, Staré Město.

22 Male respondent (\* 1926), rozhovor 9. 11. 2017, Staré Město.

situation from abroad is interestingly illustrated by a piece from the writer Josef Škvorecký, published in an American magazine for Czechoslovak exiles where, among other things, he writes about folk group being invited to a music symposium in Texas in 1986:

*“Prof. Machann, therefore, invited an ensemble he had personally heard in Moravia and whose members he had befriended. That must have ruined their trip to Texas, because it is not advisable to make friends with foreigners, even if they are – or precisely because they are – of Czech origin and haven’t dissolved perfectly into the melting pot even after four generations. After some time, Prof. Machann was told (to correctly reiterate the Rudé Právo style) that the ensemble whom he had invited could not come due to other obligations, but that another ensemble of the same quality would arrive instead. The members of that equally high-quality troupe must have fought particularly fiercely for those tickets to Texas, because again after some time prof. Machann was told that ensemble, too, because it had to fulfil certain obligations, would not appear in Texas, but that the Podlužan troupe, just as good as the two previous ones, would appear.” (Škvorecký 1987: 14)*

An essential factor for the functioning of these folk ensembles, as has already been indicated, was who their founders were. A network of educational facilities (cultural houses, educational meetings) was used for this, and ROH clubs at state enterprises, workers’ clubs, cooperative clubs, etc., were established (Franc – Knapík 2013: 201–202). These became the breeding grounds for the development of folk groups, because in addition to ideological support, an organizational platform was created that provided rehearsal spaces, financed the costumes and some of the more expensive musical instruments, covered travel expenses, etc.: “...it started here at the JZD [agricultural cooperative] in Staré Město, but then somehow they said that they didn’t have enough money [...], so the whole ensemble then moved under the auspices of Mesit [see below],” recalls a former member of the Hradištan troupe. “That’s how we saved it, because they made our costumes for us and did everything else possible.”<sup>23</sup> Ethnologist Josef Jančář says the following about the history of this ensemble:

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23 Male respondent (\* 1926), interview of 9 November 2017, Staré Město; Mesit is an acronym for **M**easuring and **S**ignals **T**echnology (*Měřicí a signalizační technika*), an industrial enterprise in Uherské Hradiště.

*“From 1950–1953, Hradištan was the ensemble of the JZD in Uherské Hradiště [...] It was the growth of these folk ensembles and groups in villages which did not have conditions for artistic development comparable to those elsewhere that contributed to the fact that the artistically creative folk ensembles were classified into two categories during competitions: The ensembles from the JZD and from the adult educational meetings, and the ensembles from the ROH clubs at state enterprises. [...] In 1954, a significant part of the [ensemble] members were employees and labourers at the new plants in Uherské Hradiště, especially the Mikrotechna plant, later called Mesit, as well as students from different types of schools. It was just natural that the newly-established club of the ROH at that enterprise would become the new establisher of the ensemble in 1954.” (Jančář – Pavlicová 1990: 26)*

On the other hand, a former member of the Kašava ensemble from the Zlín area, which was created 20 years later, recalls the following:

*“The cooperative’s support was tremendous, because the cooperative itself paid for our costumes from the start, which was no small amount of money, basically whether it was costumes, dance shoes, lots of props necessary to the ensemble, then somehow that always had to be financed by the cooperative, because most of the dancers were students. [...] Later the Cooperative Farmers’ Union (Svaz družstevních rolníků) got involved and always contributed to us too [...] for example, they paid for our bus when we went to Slovakia, or the accommodation. [...] At that time it was a kind of advantage of the regime that basically, the regime overall protected these events and essentially gave a kind of paid vacation to those involved. Some people had it like that, some firms had it like that, but some people had to draw on their own vacation time to perform; for example, I didn’t have a problem at the JZD when we travelled to England, it was a paid vacation for me. Or when we were in Košice at a competition somewhere, they gave me paid leave as well.”<sup>24</sup>*

The ideological platform became more and more formalized from the end of the 1960s, and in the 1970s and 1980s folk ensembles regularly participated in various cultural events held as part of communist anniversaries and celebrations, but the content of their performances did not

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24 Male respondent (\* 1950), interview of 21 September 2015, Kašava.

correspond in any way to the context of the event’s organizing political principles. Increasingly, moreover, such manifestations of socialist reality just involved the name of the event, under which a completely common cultural occasion, such as a parade of folk groups, a folklore festival, a city’s own festival, etc., was hidden. In the work of the troupes, staged stylizations of various degrees prevailed, complemented by public activities such as organizing dance parties. These activities stood (and still stand) on the border between public productions and satisfying the individual needs of the ensemble members, which is already a different point of view when studying this issue (cf. Pavlicová – Uhlíková 2008b).

### Experts in the folklore revival movement’s service

The issue of connecting professional research to expressions of folk tradition and their presentation can be traced to the late 19th century, when ethnographic science was taking shape. Artefacts that were material were being presented in line with the development of the industry of museums, and another such case was that of the “live performances” which gained great popularity during the preparations for the Czechoslovak Ethnographic Exhibition in 1895 and throughout that exhibition as well. This was a certain milestone in the development of folk material as staged theatre that foreshadowed the way folk material would be presented, even as all the complexities connected with this endeavour were also revealed simultaneously. However, the involvement of experts in such activities in practice became the rule, and the mutual relationship between the gradually-developing folklore revival movement and such educated figures grew stronger. They also began developing formats that were organized in the period after the Second World War. The example of the founding of the Moravian Dance and Singing Choir is an interesting one,<sup>25</sup> begun in Brno in 1946 by Vladimír Úlehla and his wife Maryna Úlehlová-Hradilová, which ran with Brno’s Regional Cultural Council and Regional Educational Council as its sponsors (Kosíková 1998: 180). The Úlehlas’ vision of creating a professional troupe in that format did not materialize, ultimately, but even so the choir’s creation and operation for several years prefigured many subsequent such attempts in the field of the folklore revival movement. “*Furthermore, we realized it is our duty not just to salvage what can still be saved, but also to attempt, with the aid of co-workers who are professionals, a critical, prudent reconstruction of this cultural entity as an indigenous whole, of which we have conserved fragments,*” the Úlehlas wrote in their “Explanatory Report on Establishing a Choir”

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25 Cf. *Od folkloru k folklorismu* 1997: 168–169.

(Kosíková 1998: 180). Although their idea had matured in wartime, it is certainly no negligible matter that the impetus for it was the appearance of two Soviet state troupes in Czechoslovakia in 1945:

*“The performances recently by the choirs from the Soviet state [the Choirs for National Song in the USSR and for the Folk Dance of the USSR] showed how much can be extracted from the art of the people for the artistically distinctive expression of the entire nation, and to what degree such creations growing from the nation’s own roots is a factor, politically and socially.”* (Kosíková 1998: 180)

In this case, however, one can speak more about the atmosphere after the end of the war in society and about an admiration of a certain kind for the professionalism of the Soviet folk troupes than about communist ideological pressure.

An emphasis that is far more political can be seen in the establishment of the Czechoslovak State Ensemble for Folk Song and Dance, which dates to 1948, when it was founded by the Information and Public Enlightenment Minister. It must be added, however, that this idea came from choreographer Jožka Šarševá and the collector, filmmaker and photographer Karel Plicka (*Od folkloru k folklorismu* 1997: 146–147). Art scene figures and those from dance, folkloristics and musical professionals were represented in the artistic management of this ensemble as well as among the creatives who contributed to its work. It was akin to other professional ensembles that worked with folk material, e.g., the Brno Radio Orchestra of Folk Instruments, Vít Nejedlý’s Army Art Ensemble – especially its so-called folk ensemble – and the Jánošík Military Song and Dance Ensemble (*Od folkloru k folklorismu* 1997: 137, 139–140, 173).

Folklore festivals served as a significant level of connection between the folklore revival movement and the professional sphere. This can be demonstrated by the establishment of the (later International) Folklore Festival in Strážnice in 1946 and its existence to this day (Krist – Pavličová 2015: 278–291). From the beginning, not just organizational workers contributed to forming this festival, but also especially the ethnographers and folklorists who, from their erudite perspectives, guided the output presented onstage so it would have the “proper” form. Already the Conference of Ethnographers, the first to be held nationally in 1949, had adopted a resolution that their field would assume responsibility for ensembles of folk songs and dances, their artistic programs, their development, and how the folklore festivals used them (Jančář 2015: 273). In this context, if we return to the Strážnice festival, its status as a national and subsequently an

international festival, the organization of which was anchored in an institution that was professional, enabled a discussion about the development of the folklore revival movement that took place society-wide. As part of a cathartic process after the *en masse* ideologization in the first half of the 1950s, this discussion was established in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Through this “cleansing” it was possible to maintain the active involvement of the professional public, not just in the festival program preparation, but also to continue to stabilize this trend throughout the entire folklore revival movement, which was contributed to by a network of educational workplaces guaranteeing editorial and methodological work which were oriented in a similar way.<sup>26</sup> This direction can be seen as persisting until the beginning of the 1990s, when adjustments were made to many factors affecting the folklore revival movement in general as a result of the social system’s transformation.

## Conclusion

Hannah Arendt, the philosopher who analysed the essence of the functioning of totalitarian regimes, has shown that one of the first steps taken by a new dictatorship is usually to erase life in the public sphere, which involves destroying life in the private sphere (Arendt 1951). According to Czech historian Matěj Spurný, three aspects are important in the success of an authoritarian regime in terms of destroying the existing order and newly organizing society “under the regime”: The appearance of a conserved continuity (most of society continues to live in almost the same way as before); the actual implementation of certain “bonuses” (“the promise of a better life and social progress for broad sections of society cannot remain just a phrase, but is actually fulfilled”); and finally, at least some of the new regime’s representatives are convinced of the authenticity and legitimacy of its ideas:

*“... ideology, if it is to be a successful tool for changing thinking and practice, is never just an exterior guise to deceive people, one that those wearing the guise themselves do not believe. This is not to say*

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<sup>26</sup> Culture centres at the district and regional level were one of the few opportunities for the publication of these professionals’ editions of publications based on primary sources: Academic institutions, beginning in the 1950s, had to fulfil current social order, in this case, the folk ensembles needs. As a consequence, this chiefly led to the birth of content-limited editions where choreographic descriptions of dance were the priority; collections of songs were almost never issued, just popular songbooks.

*that there are not cold cynics in the dictatorships that emerge among their power players, those who say one thing and think something absolutely different, but if we really want to understand the rise of a dictatorship, we must also be able to see the authentic belief in the beneficence of the established system, which is convincingly, with conviction, disseminated by the elites who are new. Cold calculation is not the key to a manipulation that succeeds truly; hearts that burn for such ideas are the key.” (Spurný 2017)*

As for the folklore revival movement, its massiveness, in the sense of dozens or even hundreds of youth-type ensembles emerging, was related to the optimistic social situation specific to postwar Czechoslovakia, which the disillusionment of the 1950s later overshadowed. The demands for a constant increase in the number of LUT members thus proved to be pointless or unattainable by the 1960s (Jírový 2005: 131). Already from the close of the 1950s, civil criticism had grown of some of the measures and procedures of the regime; a number of youth ensembles, including folk ensembles, were formed, and proposals for their reform were created at the institutions involved (Jírový 2005: 132–135). Let us recall here, among other things, the well-known text by the writer Vladimír Mináč (1958) about folk material and its heft. Taking Mináč’s words into account, the ethnologist Antonín Václavík also captured the negative features of this conjuncturalization of the folklore revival movement, writing in 1959:

*“At the beginning of our countries’ socializations, quite a few new people interested in folk culture turned up on the scene because folk art seemed to them like an easy means of turning a profit, or a convenient ladder to climb in order to achieve popularity, while others hoped to cheaply navigate the pitfalls and the requirements of the time that were tough. If some are approaching folk art unprepared, or just one-sidedly prepared, then because they are far from truly knowing the people, they fall by the wayside, while others vegetate; this pretended peoplehood is tiring, such people are a burden on folk culture.” (Václavík 1991: 21)<sup>27</sup>*

However, the degree of the collaboration of folk ensembles with political power, and the degree to which they were abused or exploited to promote the “idyllic life of the working people in a socialist society,” is just one side of the coin. At the same time, it should be noted that the regime’s support for this

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27 This contribution by A. Václavík (1891–1959) was not published until 1991.



cultural platform created a favourable environment for its further development. After the period of the truly massive, politically-controlled creation of folk ensembles and groups throughout the country, when they were founded in primary schools, secondary schools, universities, factories, agricultural co-operatives or military units, the situation “calmed down” and stabilized in the 1960s. Many ensembles expired, but those that remained focused their activities on staging folk material on an artistic basis, more or less. Their activities were supervised by the adult educational centres of methodology, which organized their training, and collaborations developed with experts in folk culture and theatrical productions. It is a completely indisputable fact that regime support led these folk ensembles toward a way of working that is still appreciated by audiences practically all over the world and that it also aided, through the folklore revival movement, with a number of folk traditions surviving to the present, albeit in an altered form and with a function that is new.

The functioning of the folklore revival movement in totalitarian Czechoslovakia cannot be evaluated from a black-and-white perspective. The collectives working in the field of maintaining folklore traditions and developing them onstage consisted of hundreds of individuals whose aims were all quite different, as were their destinies in life. Like many other areas of culture, the folklore revival movement was abused by the communist regime – but this was not always about an ignorance and naiveté on the part of the folk ensembles and their managements. The emergence *en masse* of folk ensembles and the content of some of their activities in the 1950s, their agile participation in various enterprises organized from 1948–1989 by the totalitarian state apparatus (with the knowledge that participation was often “compulsorily voluntary”), all led to the fact that some of the Czech public has an attitude towards the folklore revival movement that is negative as a whole – they perceive it to have served as the “showcase” of the totalitarian regime, as a cultural platform that sold itself out to blindly serve the political nomenclature. Nevertheless, it is clear today (and follows from current research) that during the communist dictatorship years, the motivation for the work of the vast majority of folklore revival movement members was non-political, and for many folk ensemble members, this way of spending their leisure time was a kind of spiritual shelter, an escape from ever-present political pressure into the romantically-viewed world of folk culture and its ethos. They were willing to pay a certain price for this escape, and its cost varied widely depending on the circumstances. “*Quid pro quo*,” therefore, has always affected not just the arguments being made within official structures, but also these concrete individuals’ lives.

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**Figure 1** Festivity of Folk Dance and Singing (“Strážnice 1951”) – from the front of the parade through the city. The children at the head of the parade are wearing the uniforms of a communist-controlled organization for children and youth. Photo: NÚLK Archive (National Institute of Folk Culture), Strážnice



**Figure 2** Festivity of Folk Dance and Singing (“Strážnice 1951”) – the Glory Gate in Rybářská Street. Inscription on the gate: Stalin – Gottwald [the first communist President of Czechoslovakia] – work – achievements – socialism. Photo: NÚLK Archive, Strážnice



**Figure 3** Czechoslovakia in Song and Dance (“Strážnice 1952”) – parade through the city. Young workers carrying a banner reading “Klement Gottwald’s New Steelworks greets the Festivity in Strážnice”. Photo: NÚLK Archive, Strážnice



**Figure 4** Czechoslovakia in Song and Dance (“Strážnice 1952”) – head of the parade. The inscription on the gate: “United around the party and the government, we will build socialism in our country”. The banner features a portrait of President Gottwald. Photo: NÚLK Archive, Strážnice





**Figure 5** Show by ensembles of folk songs and dances (“Strážnice 1953”) – folk ensemble Vsacan from Vsetín. Above the grandstand is a portrait of the second communist Czechoslovak President, Antonín Zápotocký. Photo: NÚLK Archive, Strážnice



**Figure 6** Festivity of Folk Dance and Singing (“Strážnice 1953”) – parade through the city. The inscription on the banner: “The Julius Fučík Ensemble of the Klement Gottwald Automobile Works. For the New Man, for a cultural and joyful life”. Photo: NÚLK Archive, Strážnice