



## **Interview**

Daniel Freeman about  
Czech composer  
Josef Mysliveček **4**

## **Spotlight**

Prof. Králíčková is  
Charles University's  
first female rector **12**

## **Science**

Prof. Jiří Bártek:  
A lifelong passion  
for science **22**

## **Books**

David R. Moulis:  
Photographing the  
ancient world **28**

## **Forum Radio**

Kamila Kopřivová:  
The Czechs' first  
female rabbi **34**

**CU alumna**  
**Pavla Horáková**

The good  
old days?  
Just an  
**illusion!**

→ **38**



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PHOTO BY Vladimír Šigut

## Dear readers,

As many of you know, one of my main goals since becoming the head of Charles University (CU) in February 2022 has been to expand elements that make our university exceptional and at the same time to introduce paths forward that are entirely new. As always, the goal is to prepare students exceptionally well, even in times of difficulty, for the many challenges ahead. And to persevere.

While preparing new ground, it is equally important to draw upon already existing foundations, where CU has long been both a reliable and innovative partner, whether we are talking about economics, physics, geography, archaeology, medicine, the natural sciences, physical education, the humanities and much more. Running a university is a huge responsibility, but opening up original opportunities is so very much worth it: when the results match or exceed expectations, there is no better feeling in the world! We remain dedicated to long-running but also innovative programmes supporting excellence in scientific research, like the ERC and ERC pipeline, and new tools such as broader cooperation with *Czexpats in Science*. These are all immensely important if Charles University is to fulfil, and improve on, its role as a top research university.

At CU, we remain dedicated to further internationalisation and cooperation, offering new possibilities for students and staff, collaboration and sharing of resources in joint projects, and the

promotion of shared humanistic values. Charles University is a proud member of the 4EU+ Alliance, CENTRAL, CE7, COIMBRA group and other networks with whom we continue to grow and learn. And take a common stance of solidarity, which includes offering real help to those whose lives were changed beyond recognition by the war in Ukraine.

Today, our students number some 50 thousand; 20 percent hail from abroad. Charles University is also an important destination for academics, researchers and guest lecturers from all over the world. Some of whom are profiled in this very issue of *Forum*. There is an interview with acclaimed American musicologist Daniel E. Freeman; we talk to the most cited Czech-born scientist dedicated to medicinal research, Jiří Bártek, a must-read; and you can meet alumna Kamila Kopřivová, on track to becoming the first Czech female rabbi.

All the best!

**Milena Králíčková**  
Rector of Charles University



You can read  
our articles online too!  
[ukforum.cz/en](http://ukforum.cz/en)

4

# Contents

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## Interview

DANIEL E. FREEMAN – Mysliveček's excellence caught me by surprise / 4

## Spotlight

Charles University's first female rector / 12

## Worldview

Condemning aggression and standing with Ukraine / 14

## Students

RADIM TAUBER – I had to google common gestures / 16

DOMINIKA GERŽOVÁ – A champion in water rescue / 18

JAROSLAV MATĚJKA – Guiding at an historic hospital / 20

## Science

JIŘÍ BÁRTEK – A lifelong passion for science / 22



12

MARTIN KOTORA – Inspiring the next generation of chemists / 26

## Books

DAVID RAFAEL MOULIS – Photographing the ancient world / 28

## Forum Radio

KAMILA KOPŘIVOVÁ – The Czechs' first female rabbi / 34

PAVLA HORÁKOVÁ – The good old days? Just an illusion! / 38

## Arts

MAREK KULHAVÝ – Covered head to toe in paint / 42

## Alumni

JAN SÝKORA – The path of intellectual curiosity / 46

PETR JÁKL – Bringing a medieval warlord to the big screen / 50



34

## Nature

ERIK MEIJAARD – Silver bullet solutions do not exist / 54

## My CU

A magnificent place to stay / 58

## Life at CU / 60

## Final word

Master of ceremonies / 64



42



# Myslivoček's excellence caught me by **surprise**

**The 18th century Czech composer Josef Mysliveček is at last getting the attention he deserves, says acclaimed American musicologist Daniel E. Freeman. If so, it is in no small part thanks to Freeman's own extensive research into the composer's music and life. Freeman was recently honoured by CU's Faculty of Arts. He gave a lecture on Mysliveček's remarkable friendship with both Leopold and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.**

STORY BY Jan Velinger PHOTOS BY Vladimír Šigut, Richard Hodonický

### How did you come to study 18th century Czech composers, specifically Josef Mysliveček?

The story began with my dissertation advisor John Walter Hill who was – and is – a prominent scholar in Vivaldi studies. In the 1980s, they knew that Vivaldi had visited Prague. But there wasn't anyone in western Europe or North America who would touch the topic. It was simply too difficult: linguistically and politically. So he just told me "Well, we're going to have you do that!" (*laughs*). I was dispatched to communist Czechoslovakia to learn about Vivaldi and Prague. And I had to learn the language as best I could, first.

I completed my studies and I completed my dissertation called *The Opera Theatre of Count Franz Anton von Sporck* – which was the theatre that Vivaldi was associated with. That book was really about Vivaldi and Prague. Even before I came here for the first time, I realised that once I would be finished with *that* study, there were still two other book-length topics that were ripe for treatment in English, that would be very interesting for English-speaking scholars. One was the life of Josef Mysliveček because of his association with Mozart. The other topic was Mozart in Prague. I produced books devoted to each one. The big surprise about Mysliveček is that his music was so unexpectedly excellent.

### Is it fair to say – at the time of the Cold War – that a lot of this was unmined territory?

Indeed. There were of course some studies in Czech but to be thorough there was more that was needed. That was true of all three topics and I was only too glad to try and find out new things in all three cases – and I did. In one of the archives, I just wanted to leap out of the chair! I couldn't sleep at night when I found something that had been declared lost but wasn't!

### What were your first impressions of life here?

My impression was that this was one of the most beautiful places I had ever been. On my first day I walked all the way from the dormitory in Břevnov to Prague Castle and I thought I had landed in a fairy tale! The biggest thing I learned very quickly about life under communism was this: as a citizen, you had to take a political stance every day of your life. Either to collaborate or to resist the regime in all sorts of subtle and non-subtle ways. And that was something horrible I could not imagine; it struck me as an intolerable pressure. But I was very lucky: I was a privileged foreigner who was excluded from that.

### If we turn to Josef Mysliveček, how did he find his way to music? One of the things you mentioned in your recent lecture at CU's Faculty of Arts was that he never would have

## I was dispatched to communist Czechoslovakia to learn about Vivaldi and Prague. And I had to learn the language as best I could, first.

### pursued that career if he hadn't lost his father at the age of 12...

I don't think his father would have permitted it and he was lucky his step-father probably didn't have much authority over him. So he was able to pursue what he really wanted to do.

### He would have been a miller?

He already *was* and had achieved the rank of master miller that included a rigorous study of mathematics, hydraulics, and engineering. He completed it all. It was required of master millers to be able to construct a miniature model of a mill from scratch.

### Becoming a composer... wasn't it very late in the game?

Extraordinarily late in the game to make it your principal occupation. However, 18th century Bohemia had a very special musical culture similar to modern times but unique in Europe at that time. Musical instruction was normal and actually required, even at elementary school. And that is what happened to Mysliveček. He did learn more than singing: he also received violin lessons when he was quite young, which his father had allowed.

### If he had the talent, do we know how he made his way into the social strata? Because it's one thing to have talent and another to get commissions and to make a name for yourself.

All that we know for certain is that he had a magnetic personality and that he was a charismatic individual. Exactly how he approached these people, who he spoke to and how he spoke to them, in order to get to the top people, remains a mystery. On the other hand, within Bohemia it wouldn't have been so hard because he was in the artisan classes and his father was quite wealthy. That made things much easier.

### Was Italy the place to go for the composer who became known as *il divino Boemo* – the divine Bohemian?

The *divino* is a myth that was widely perpetuated in the 20th century. It was not used in Mysliveček's time but only much later. The source of the expression was a novella or *romanello* by Jakub Arbes in the 1880s titled *Il divino Boemo*. It's a suspicious appellation for an 18th century composer because

it wasn't really until the 19th century that it became common to ascribe *divinity* to great artistic figures such as the divine Sarah Bernhardt and others.

### Nevertheless, he took off in Italy.

Oh, he did and he made quite a mark! It's absolutely miraculous that somebody from the Bohemian lands could be on the same level of fame and success as the most successful native Italian composers of his favourite genre, which was serious Italian opera. It was miraculous because there was a small elite group of composers who pretty much wrote all of them, in all of the great cities. It was a small elite in any single year that you would expect to provide all of the operas in Italy.

### What are key compositions that anybody interested in Mysliveček should hear?

I would say especially his brilliant opera *L'Olympiad* that has the unusual setting of the Olympic Games in ancient Greece. The story is of great interest but the music is the most interesting of all, it simply sparkles. It even has types of music that you would never expect him to be capable of writing. For example, there is an aria that a lover sings to his girlfriend while she sleeps and it is just the style of a sweet lullaby.

Then of course he was a great master of oratorio and it has long been known that his *Isacco – Figure del Redentore* was a masterpiece. So much a masterpiece that it was often mistaken for a composition by Mozart. And it was by Mysliveček – that's how excellent he was!

Another vista of excellence is his instrumental music and pretty much any recorded symphonies you find will be excellent and that is also true of his opera overtures. He wrote opera overtures that are significantly higher in quality than any of his Italian contemporaries: most of theirs are not worth hearing whereas his are interesting and enjoyable! So any of Mysliveček's symphonies, any of his opera overtures, any of his violin concertos – which I believe are the best in Europe between the era of Vivaldi and Tartini and Locatelli in the 1730s and 1740s and then the great series by Mozart in 1775.

### To come back to his training as a miller: you suggested in your talk that there were certain elements from his artisan training that informed his compositions. What were they?

I am convinced of it. It's the very tight, systematic, logical way that he puts a musical piece together. This is something that you don't notice very much unless you listen to a lot of music by the lesser masters. Compared to those, the compositions of Mozart, Hayden, and Beethoven, for example, are extraordinary for the way that they logically connect musical ideas. Most of the lesser composers couldn't do that very well: there was over-repetition, there was a sense of stopping and starting because they couldn't connect the ideas well, some got lost into incoherency, heading into directions they couldn't get out of or bring to a logical conclusion – a very good example would be Johann Christian Bach.

But with Mysliveček everything is perfectly logical, perfectly symmetrical, like an engineering mod- ↪

Daniel E. Freeman is both a musicologist and a classically trained pianist. Here, he tries a piano at Prague's Masaryk train station. The piano is part of the *Pianos in the Street* project.





el. That's how he is and if you compare some the early things that Mozart was writing just before and just after he met him, you see the same logical, symmetrical, perfectly balanced constructions. I think he did have an impact on Mozart when he was young and I believe that there is a correlation with the way he put a musical piece together, with the way he made a hydraulic model.

**Let's talk about this fascinating relationship between Leopold Mozart, his son Wolfgang and Josef Mysliveček: what made it so unusual?**

There are many different reasons for that. You would think that someone as great as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart would have so many admirers among musicians and friends and great colleagues but it really didn't work out that way for him. There always seemed to be a problem with those he came into contact with and there were a lot of people with whom he just wasn't friendly. He wasn't a mean person, he didn't want to hate people – like many wanted to hate him – but he still wasn't close to a lot of people. He didn't burn with

hatred for Salieri but their paths just didn't cross that much even though they lived in the same city. His friendship with Mysliveček, on the other hand, was really a true, personal friendship that had musical implications, with one composer serving as a model for the other that helped Mozart improve his skills. For long term, that's unique.

**Leopold was also impressed by Josef Mysliveček and the friendship lasted for eight years before hitting a snag which led to their falling out. At the centre of the conflict was a commission promised to the younger Mozart that never materialised.**

Indeed, in 1777 Wolfgang was really in a spot because he had quit his job and he was really too young for the type of posting that he would have really wanted, in other words, being the head of a musical establishment. But he was just too young to be doing that because the musicians he would have supervised simply wouldn't have listened to him. They would have just thought he was too inexperienced. So it was a question of what to do and Mysliveček suggested a solution to the father: that he would give up one of his opera commissions in Naples to Wolfgang since the latter was in a pinch. He claimed that he had the power to arrange a commission at the top opera house in Italy at the time, the *Teatro di San Carlo* in Naples. We don't know for sure if this was a lie from the start or if he really thought he could pull it off.

What we do know for sure it that he used this promise as leverage with Leopold as a path to the

older Mozart's employer, the archbishop of Salzburg. Leopold fulfilled everything he was asked and brought Mysliveček quite a lot of money and a lot of exposure at the court of Salzburg. But Mysliveček failed to uphold his part of the bargain. He failed to swing the commission and, what's worse, was dishonest about it, delaying for months and making excuses until it was clear it wasn't going to happen. I personally feel that his motivations were mixed: he actually genuinely had a lot of affection for the Mozarts but in the end his own situation had become so impossible that he had to seek sources of income any place he could. And he did use Leopold.

**Leopold Mozart was nobody's fool so if you crossed him once...**

If you crossed Leopold once then the door was shut. Forever.

**Mysliveček's fortunes took a turn for the worse including incurable health problems. You mentioned that there is only one existing source confirming the root of these and that was the Mozart correspondence.**

I cannot stress this enough: if it were not for the exchange of correspondence over the period of a few weeks involving Leopold, Wolfgang and Mysliveček, there would be no historical indication that Mysliveček had a reputation as a seducer or that he had contracted a venereal disease. Leopold was a prude and he told his son not to have anything to do with him. It was not only a question of 'punishing' him for having contracted VD but he didn't want his son around anybody with that kind of personality, frightened that his son might copy the behaviour of his magnetically attractive friend. He wanted to keep Wolfgang away from that.

**I read there was this botched operation in Munich where his nose was burned off trying to remove growths from syphilis...**

The disease destroys the septum.

**So was that it at that point for them? Because there is a moment that the younger Mozart had seen him and had apparently pitied him.**

Mozart was human and he was also desperate for money and for a job. He had also realised that Mysliveček, despite his promise, was not going to deliver on it. He also became disillusioned and there is a letter where he ridicules him for his sexual promiscuity. Then there is an even more vicious letter from later in the year 1778 in Paris when Wolfgang actually stoops to ridiculing his appearance without a nose, suggesting he should be hired at the court at Salzburg because he would frighten the musicians into obedience with his appearance! That was really below the belt. Mysliveček had done nothing to Wolfgang to deserve *that*.

**So he certainly had a biting sarcasm when he felt like it...**

Mozart was famous for his denigrations. However, I have to point out that there is a lot of mounting indirect evidence that he had second thoughts. He seemed to want to forgive his old friend, even sort of paying tribute to him. But that's Wolfgang. He had a good heart, unlike his father.

**Your research provided an important basis for a documentary about Mysliveček by Czech-born director Petr Václav several years ago. It was followed by the feature film titled *Il Boemo*, released this year, where you were also a consultant. The picture is the Czech film academy's nominee for Best International Feature Film at the Oscars. How did you like it?**

I loved it! I could see he had paid close attention to the factual, historical framework that I set up.

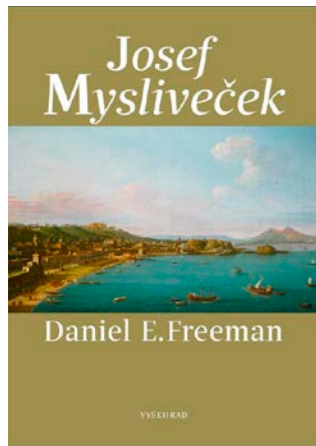


Vojtěch Dyk and Lana Vlady in Petr Václav's *Il Boemo*, released in 2022. Mimesis films, photos by Richard Hodonický.



Forum Radio®

Scan the QR code to hear the complete interview with Daniel E. Freeman at Forum Radio.



The Czech edition of Daniel E. Freeman's *Josef Mysliveček, "Il Boemo": The Man and His Music* published by Vyšehrad in 2021.

Everything had to be fleshed out, however, and that is what astonished me! Especially the way he brought the 18th century to life. Typically in historical films it's idealised and centred around the nobles and what they believed were their lovely lives and beautiful clothing and 'correct' behaviour. But actually 18th century society was a lot more gritty and dirty and morally corrupt than most people realise.

**There always has to be some leeway though, right?**

There has to be. We live in modern times and we have to appeal to modern audiences and that's the way it is. Some things have to be adjusted.

**I know that many musicologists over the years have had a bone to pick with *Amadeus* by the late director Miloš Forman. On its own merits many consider it a brilliant film. Most people today know that in many regards it is not historically accurate nor did it try to be: the whole Salieri-Mozart hatred is a fabrication based on historical rumours and then a Peter Schafer play and screenplay. Nevertheless, the films do invite comparison. Will audiences appreciate the differences between the two?**

I believe they will and I believe some of the differences are that the first was a Hollywood movie. I have so many complaints about *Amadeus*, however I am the first to acknowledge how much interest it created in Mozart's music and classical music in general. It has to be complimented for that, it has to be singled out and praised just for that, even though I feel there are many problems otherwise in many areas, the most important being the complete mischaracterisation of Mozart.

I did have a most extraordinary piece of information that came to me from the director. Then

everything started to make sense and it connected the dots for me in a lot of ways, because he knew Forman and they had talked and Forman at one point said he had been interested in Josef Mysliveček. No doubt making a movie about him would have been absolutely out of the question: he wasn't well known, there was too little music. But the phoney way Forman characterised Mozart as a libertine made me think perhaps in the end he did get a little bit of Mysliveček into the film.

**I have seen *Amadeus* many times and even as a kid was thrilled when Mozart pulls Constanze under the table and talks backwards during their courtship: such a scamp and such a little devil. And I always just took it that he had been carted all around Europe as a child prodigy – which we see snippets of – and that he was just a petulant, spoiled kid...**

... a spoiled kid his whole life. Well, the historical justification for Forman's portrayal is the child, teenage and young adult Mozart. Mozart *did* grow up though... and Forman really doesn't show you that. I do want to emphasise that Petr Václav would not necessarily endorse the *Mysliveček as Mozart* theory: it was just his retelling of a conversation he had had with Forman that got me thinking and when it comes to *Amadeus* everything makes a lot more sense to me now.

**Daniel E. Freeman, Ph.D.**, is an acclaimed American musicologist with long ties to the Czech Republic. As a student, he earned a B.Mus. in piano performance from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a Master's and Ph.D. in musicology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In the 1980s, Freeman learned Czech before travelling to Czechoslovakia to conduct research. His findings led to his dissertation titled *The Opera Theater of Count Franz Anton von Sporck in Prague (1724–1735)* later published as the first monograph in English devoted to the musical cultural of 18th century Prague. Dr. Freeman also wrote the acclaimed *Josef Mysliveček, "Il Boemo"* (2009) and *Mozart in Prague* (2013). During his most recent stay in Prague, Freeman was awarded a medal from the Faculty of Arts of Charles University recognising his life's work.



# Charles University's first female rector



**To move information systems into the 21st century, to benefit from internationalization and to support women scientists. These are some of the plans Rector Milena Králíčková has put forward during her tenure. Professor Králíčková took up the leadership of the largest and oldest university in the Czech Republic on 1 February 2022 – the first woman to do so in the school's almost 700 year history!**

STORY BY *Pavla Hubálková, Martin Rychlík*  
PHOTOS BY *Vladimír Šigut*

In 674 years, a woman had never held the top job at Charles University. All of that changed in 2022, when Professor Milena Králíčková, a physician and scientist, a Fulbright scholar who studied at Harvard in the United States, took up the post. The inauguration of the first female rector of Charles University took place on 3 March in the historic Carolinum. Králíčková gave an interview to *Forum* magazine.

**Returning to your election, you won by a wide margin of 55 out of 69 senatorial votes. What was on your mind immediately after the announcement?**

It was obviously wonderful, but I was amazed that there were so many votes in my favour and, above all, that there were no blank votes! Over the months leading

up to the election, we often heard that neither candidate was “ideal” and it was suggested that there might be a number of blank votes... This did not happen and I was really pleased that everyone chose and supported their candidate.

**It is often mentioned in the media that you are the first woman rector of Charles University in its centuries-long history. Do you feel that you have already become a symbol?**

I don't see it that way in my daily work... and I don't feel like a symbol. But it's interesting that I've been approached by students and other women who say I am an inspiration for them. My daughters' classmates said as a result they felt more confident about their chances in certain positions and about their dreams for the future. I definitely see an interest from students and women; I am very pleased and hope to continue to be that positive role model throughout my tenure as rector.

**You have a lot of work ahead of you. What are the three main tasks you would like to accomplish? So that at the end of your term we can say, “Milena Králíčková was the rector who...”**

Who headed the school when the information technology ecosystem at Charles University really moved into the 21st century – a change felt by applicants, students and teachers.

**Professor Milena Králíčková has been the Rector of Charles University since 1 February 2022. In 2013, she became Vice-Rector for Student Affairs at Charles University, a position she held until taking up the top post. Králíčková graduated from the Faculty of Medicine of Charles University in Plzeň and spent a year in the Fulbright programme at Harvard in the United States. After completing her Ph.D., she worked in the Gynaecology and Obstetrics Clinic of the University Hospital in Plzeň in reproductive medicine, embryology research and also taught at the Institute of Histology and Embryology. At the Faculty of Medicine of Charles University in Plzeň she worked as Vice-Dean for Development and as the head of one of the two research programmes of the Biomedical Centre. She has two daughters.**

Second, was the person under whose leadership new campuses were completed including the largest: Mephared and Albertov, and other school properties were cared for and additional infrastructure was built. And third: was a rector who listened to others, from staff to students to applicants and the general public. And understood that a university such as ours succeeds based on the people who are a part of it.

## The Vice-Rectors

The Rector's team includes the following vice-rectors: Back row (left to right): Jan Polák (Conception and Quality of Education), Martin Vlach (Public Relations), Pavel Doleček (Strategic Cooperation and Development), Tomáš Skopal (Information Technologies), Ladislav Křišťoufek (Research) and Jan Kuklík (Academic Appointments). Front row (left to right): Markéta Křížová (International Affairs) and Markéta Martínková (Education).





# Condemning aggression and standing with Ukraine

**On 24 February 2022, Russian troops began their invasion of sovereign Ukraine, launching the largest war on European soil – and sparking the worst European refugee crisis – since WWII. War in all its horror: countless dead, civilians raped and tortured, women and children forced to flee. Charles University, with Rector Milena Králíčková in only in her third week in office, steadfastly condemned the military aggression together with other schools and institutions.**

STORY BY Martin Rychlík PHOTOS BY Vladimír Šigut, Martin Pinkas, CU archive

Throughout the spring, Charles University did its best to help those in need, by the end of May 2022 recognising some 853 applications for recognition of foreign diplomas – up to 90 percent of them because of the war in Ukraine. Support during the same period was provided for 143 freemover students, some two dozen Ukrainian academics, and three inter-university agreements with schools in Ukraine (Kyiv, Lviv, Uzhhorod). “I believe that by working together we are able to help effectively,” Rector Králíčková wrote in a statement to the academic community. There were many ways to provide aid, as key figures at Charles University confirmed in a poll for *Forum* magazine. Below is a shorter version of the original survey from Forum CZ 58 (June 2022) edited for length. Respondent’s answers reflect the early days of the conflict and the response.



The Department of Studies legislated and methodically guided the vice-deans of studies and faculty departments in the most effective assistance to Ukrainian and other students or applicants affected by the war. These students were offered individual study plans or the option of putting their studies on hold. Our students, including Ukrainian students, who requested as much and provided evidence of their situation, were awarded an appropriate scholarship to help them overcome their difficult situation and successfully complete their studies at CU (in cooperation with CU Point).

In addition, a measure was issued by the rector to ensure that applicants from Ukraine did not pay any fees for the admissions process or for the assessment of prior learning. A number of Ukrainian university students now residing in the Czech Republic received immediate financial support and the opportunity for an intensive Czech language course with freemover status. We also staffed the nostrification department with a Ukrainian-speaking assistant. I personally place great emphasis on a level playing field for all of our students. CU management is opposed to any notion of ‘collective guilt’ when it comes to Russian or Belarusian students.

## **Associate Professor Markéta Martinková**

Vice-Rector for Student Affairs

Charles University got involved from the very start of the crisis. The information services department, CU Point, increased its capacity to respond to the increased number of enquiries directed at the university. Gradually, colleagues took over the university’s crisis hotline. They also responded to countless emails, both from current students and potential students from Ukraine.

Together with the university department overseeing dormitories and refectories, CU Point set up meetings with potential refugee applicants to study at CU, housed in university buildings. Our Staff Welcome Centre also played an important role in helping incoming academics and their families. And the Carolina Centre has set up a support group for current Ukrainian students at CU who are affected by the events and need to talk about their situation and that of their families in a safe environment; it is also gradually processing applications for scholarships.

## **Marie Vymazalová, Ph.D.**

Vice-Rector for Social Affairs and Sustainable Development



**Together with her children, Associate Professor Vera Tovazhnianska fled the Russian bombardment of Kharkiv. Today, she is a researcher at the Second Faculty of Medicine of Charles University at the Motol University Hospital. She says she is glad to be in Czechia. Readers can learn more about her in the Czech edition of *Forum* (Forum 60).**

A fundraiser to help the victims of the conflict originally started at the Third Faculty of Medicine of Charles University, on the initiative of the Trimed Association: within a few hours they raised more than one million crowns. Under the leadership of the Association of Czech Medical Students and Jan Finsterle (a fifth-year student at the First Faculty of Medicine), almost three hundred thousand crowns were raised, which were used to buy medical supplies. Plus, they collected medical supplies worth more than 47 million crowns from donors! In all, 328 pallets of goods weighing 295 tons were sent to the affected areas through two aid corridors. The goods were transported to warehouses in Poland and to collection points organised by the Ukrainian Ministry of Health. Thanks to all the volunteers.

## **Alisa Shvets**

Third-year student at the First Faculty of Medicine

To help Ukraine we managed to organise a collection in Plzeň in cooperation with a diocesan charity. The main contributors were the students of the Faculty of Medicine in Plzeň, but also the general public. On behalf of the organising team, I would like to thank the management of the halls of residence and the canteens for their willingness and the facilities provided, as well as everyone who participated and contributed. The opportunities to help Ukrainians are endless: from participating in financial and material collections, to providing first aid and cooperating with humanitarian organisations, to helping with translation in offices, schools and hospitals. What would help the Ukrainians most would be early accession to the EU and NATO. And an end to the war in their country.

## **Tomáš Kalina**

Fifth-year student at the Faculty of Medicine in Plzeň

On Thursday morning, a second year classmate wrote in a group message asking for help for people fleeing the war. He was helping as an interpreter at Prague’s Main Station. At that moment it didn’t make sense to me to go to school when something as simple as hot tea could make someone’s day better. After a couple of phone calls, the Salvation Army provided us with supplies including bandaging material, tins and some non-perishable food, and two colleagues and I headed to the main station with a loaded car. When we introduced ourselves as med students from the Third Faculty of Medicine of Charles University, we were in for our first surprise: there were no other students on the scene yet. We were asked if we could stay... I checked with my friends and acquaintances in medicine who could stay in the next few hours and provide basic medical assistance. Within a few hours, there were more than 10 of us in the makeshift “infirmary” consisting of a few over-the-counter fever and pain medications, throat lozenges, a thermometer and a phonendoscope, and we stayed overnight. After almost three months of operation and two thousand patients treated, our time and energy began running out, but new colleagues were still being added and the infirmary held up. The will is still there. Glory to Ukraine!

## **Anna Krejčová**

Fifth-year at the Third Faculty of Medicine, coordinator of med students at the Main Railway Station in Prague

# I had to **google** common gestures

**As a boy, Radim Tauber failed many of his classes at elementary school because of Asperger's Syndrome and ADHD. Nevertheless, he still always found something at which he excelled. Thanks to understanding from staff at the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, he is now successfully completing his fifth year at university.**

STORY BY Jitka Jiříčková PHOTO BY Vladimír Šigut

## **Have you always enjoyed mathematics?**

I have not. Since I have Asperger's Syndrome, which is one of the autism spectrum disorders, and ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), studying at primary school was always very challenging. I got failing or near-failing grades in almost all of my subjects and ended up at a lot of different elementary schools. Ironically, the one with the worst reputation, with the highest number of troubled students, was the one that helped me the most. The teachers there were used to everything. They understood behavioural fluctuations and were able to tailor lessons especially for me.

## **When were you diagnosed?**

In the fourth grade, but the symptoms were already evident in preschool. According to my teachers, I failed to follow assignments as instructed, which was – by far – the most common reaction I encountered. People with Asperger's often cannot understand what others want us to do, and it is therefore almost impossible for us to accomplish ordinary tasks.

## **Did your parents understand?**

Yes, they did. They never forced me into anything, nor did they have to, as I always found things I en-

joyed doing. They've always been totally supportive. They arranged private math as well as piano lessons for me. By adjusting lessons to my pace, I suddenly mastered math well. And because I was good at it, I began to enjoy it. My overall poor grades at elementary school meant I didn't go to a classic high school, but to an electro-industrial trade school, which was better for me in the end. I could specialise much more easily and concentrate on what I enjoyed. For example, I created a so-called cell cultivator, a device that can preserve living cells in an artificial environment, and I won a prize for it in the Secondary School Vocational Activity Competition.

## **All the same, the entrance exams to the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics must have been tough.**

They tested logical reasoning ability, which is an adequate requirement, but the wording of the problems was totally inappropriate for people with ADHD like me. It was really challenging to understand the assignments. I would say I only managed the entrance exams with the help of a higher power (*laughs*).

## **Even the start of your studies at the faculty was quite harsh, I heard.**

It was a complete shock. I couldn't get a foothold and I couldn't last more than 15 minutes into a lecture. The tempo was just too quick and I was unable to absorb all the information, let alone take notes. It felt like hearing only the rustling of leaves. However, the faculty was amazingly helpful and it's possible to agree on a plan with your teachers. I took advantage of a so-called *slowdown option*

designed for students with physical, mental, or personal difficulties. It meant spreading out study obligations for one year over two. In the first fall semester, I passed only two exams, but then, in the spring semester, I managed to catch up.

## **How does individualised learning work in practice?**

I arrange with the teachers to assign me work and I sit in an empty classroom next to their office and work there all day, sometimes going to them to ask questions. It helps tremendously. I can then study for the exam in one week without going to seminars or lectures during the semester. I have to complete the same course load as anyone else. And sometimes even more – but I can work at my own pace.

## **What is crucial for a person with your disability?**

To not be embarrassed to talk about their problems. To explain exactly what they need and what would help. Educators did not understand at first why I didn't go to lectures and engage in the class. When they found out the reason was not laziness, they tried to help. Often a small step is enough to make a big difference.

## **How do your classmates see you?**

My lifelong specificity lies in the fact that I make an absolutely disastrous first impression. In a new environment, among strangers, I am thinking about a lot of things, which takes away my focus on controlling my demeanour. I then often react inappropriately, for example, gesticulating excessively or modulating my voice strangely. I can sound un-

**Radim Tauber was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome and ADHD in the fourth grade, which went a long way in explaining why he so often had failing grades and had been shuffled from school to school. After completing a technical trade school. He applied for the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics of Charles University. His teachers, familiar with his needs, showed him understanding and helped him to succeed.**

comfortable. Sometimes I am also too frank. Over time, when I make closer contact with a person, it gets better.

## **Do you have to 'reel in' or tamp down your behaviour?**

Very much so. But sometimes, I just do something because I need to do it, and I don't care what others think. I might whistle a tune that's going through my head when I'm in a good mood, even if it is inappropriate. Sometimes, when I'm thinking, I'll stomp or walk in circles to reel in my ADHD. It seems normal to me.

## **You're now a senior. What are your plans?**

I have quite a few interests. I've been working on my own theory about the foundations of mathematics for a few years now. In order to develop it further, and maybe publish it one day, I will need money. That's why I'm training in programming and computer technology, so that I can start an IT business. I don't want to be an average scientist, I want to do something extraordinary. It may seem a bit pretentious, but that's how my whole life works. I always set the highest goals for myself. I may not achieve them, but I at least want to try.



**I have to complete the same course load as anyone else. And sometimes even more – but I can work at my own pace.**

# A champion in water rescue

**She picked up medals as a junior swimmer both at home and at international events, but she is also hoping to take a break from the pool: Dominika Geržová, a student at the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport at Charles University. The swimmer's interests include physiotherapy and business as well as water rescue sports. Even if she takes a break, she is not likely to hang up her swimming cap for long.**

STORY BY Jiří Novák PHOTOS BY Vladimír Šigut

Sports associations that organise championship competitions in water rescue sports, pitting top swimmers in lifesaving disciplines such as *manikin relay*, *beach sprint* and *surf race*, are an important part of the Czech Red Cross Water Rescue Service. The best swimmers in water rescue are, not surprisingly, also members of national teams competing in both the European and World Championships. CU student Dominika Geržová knows a thing or two about that: she was a part of the most successful Czech team ever in water rescue, at the 2017 European Championships. She won the junior women's *surf race* easily and clinched a bronze medal in

*obstacles*. Two years later, in 2019 in Riccione, Italy, she competed as a senior and also won a bronze in *surf race* held on the open water.

She returned again to Riccione this September for the World Championships but was unlucky. This time, injury got in the way: injured ligaments in her ankle limited her to 20th spot in the individual race and 12th in the relay. She was looking to improve her spirits at the World InterUniversities in Barcelona, having brought home three gold medals and the overall swimming championship from the same event last year. And did she ever! Dominika dominated by clinching a total of five medals

including two gold! Despite the powerhouse performance, it will probably be her last swimming competition for a while, as the member of the KPS Ostrava swimming club has planned something of a swimming holiday when the season wraps up.

"I see it as a one-year break and a return to the World Aquatics Championships in Australia in two years' time. A career as a professional athlete has never been a top priority for me," she says.

Will it be hard to return to the pool after such an extended layoff? "I don't think so. I've always been able to swim similar times as I used to after two weeks of training, so I don't think I need that much to catch up," she says optimistically.

## From classic swimming to lifesaving

Geržová's path to water rescue began with traditional swimming lessons, which she started in her native Krnov. Her mother introduced her to swimming at the same time as her brother. While her brother eventually gave up the sport (and now does Greco-Roman wrestling instead), she persevered. At the same time, she always had her feet on the proverbial ground, the swimmer explains:

"I never set very big goals for myself in swimming. My mum always just told me to try and do my best and I did. The Olympics were such a distant dream for me that I didn't even think about it... After a few years, I found swimming not as fulfilling, so I tried lifeguarding," Geržová explains. Krnov has one of the best water rescue associations in the country so it was a great place to start.

Although she only does water rescue as a sport, she thinks she would have no problem doing real lifesaving. "From my childhood I remember an experience when my dad had to pull an elderly lady who was drowning out of the water. I was about 10 years old at the time." Although she worked as a lifeguard at the pool a few times during the summer, she has never had to save anyone in similar

**I've always been able to swim similar times as I used to after two weeks of training, so I don't think I need that much to catch up.**

circumstances yet. But she certainly knows how. As for her favourite discipline? That's easy, the competitor says:

"I enjoy *surf race* the most. You start en masse on the shore, run into the sea where you can push off the sea floor, swim 400 metres to marked buoys and rush ashore," the swimmer says. She also likes *beach flag*, where competitors run sprints on the beach with someone dropping out each lap: "There's a lot of contact, it's all elbows back and forth."

With all that excitement, in the pool and on the open sea, won't she get bored on dry land? Um no, not a chance!

## A valuable break

Dominka's partner is a co-owner of BUI, a football clothing and goalkeeper glove company in Opava, where she helps with social media management, creating original content, including videos. And while her boyfriend is also the new head goalkeeper manager at Slezský FC Opava, she is the new physiotherapist for the B-team. Besides all that, she also works at youth camps as a medic and is considering starting a business of her own.

"I think I will have enough things to do," the 23-year-old athlete laughs. She and her boyfriend recently moved into a new apartment with a nice and spacious kitchen, so she's looking forward to trying a slew of inventive recipes. Cooking is just another of her many hobbies.

**Dominika Geržová is a native of Krnov and CU student representing the Czech Republic in swimming. In the pool she has several medals from the national championships, the most recent being this year's gold in the 4×100 m freestyle relay with KPS Ostrava. At the last Academic Games, she won eight medals, two of them gold. She is a past junior European champion in water rescue, and won bronze at the European Championships 2019. She is studying fitness coaching at Charles University's Faculty of Physical Education and Sport.**



# Guiding at an historic hospital

An unforgettable sight: the historic Kuks Hospital in East Bohemia.



It's fascinating to learn how health care was practiced here more than three hundred years ago.



**“Being a tour guide at the historic Kuks Hospital taught me a lot,” says Jaroslav Matějka, a fourth-year student at the Third Faculty of Medicine of Charles University. Above all, he credits it with teaching him how to communicate better with others.**

STORY BY Marcela Uhlíková  
PHOTOS BY Vladimír Šigut, Shutterstock

## **Kuks is about people**

“I have actually never enjoyed sightseeing. I usually find guided presentations boring and they rarely capture my imagination. I prefer to just walk around outdoor exhibitions and not waste time listening to information I can look up myself,” says med student Jaroslav Matějka. However, Jaroslav says, things are different at Kuks. It's about the people involved. “We have a great group of students, teachers, a lawyer, a former headmaster and even a few retirees who are fun to be with. Everybody's approach and interpretation is different even though each of our tours is based on historical sources.”

## **A treasure trove of information**

Information about Kuks can seem infinite: “I often learn something new I didn't know thanks to historians at the site. Occasionally, I uncover something

on my own and then consult my discoveries with my colleagues,” he says with enthusiasm. “Thanks to a documentary from 1968, we know that Kuks was a hospital for long-term patients and for a time was even a lunatic asylum! The footage shows, for example, a room where the deceased from the entire hospital were laid before being transferred to coffins. Kuks got to me also because I study medicine. It's fascinating to learn how health care was practiced here more than three hundred years ago.”

Had he lived there on the banks of the Elbe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Jaroslav Matějka says he would have preferred the opposite bank, where the Sporck spa was located. “I would come to the hospital occasionally and for a day at most, although the patients had a nice life here: there was a pub, they sold alcohol and cigarettes, and they could even leave the hospice for three days at a time,” he says with a smile.

## **Medicine is sexy**

Before the guiding season starts in April, Jaroslav is “only” a regular med student with his mind on his studies and exams. “Year after year, after overcoming the most difficult of exams, older classmates assure me that from now on I will enjoy my studies to the fullest. Well, actually, I'm still waiting! So far, I'm just losing my hair at school,” the fourth-year says with self-deprecatory amusement.

As for his specialisation, he has yet to decide and it's not an easy decision to take. “It's terrible but when I get hands-on experience somewhere, I start thinking that might be my specialisation. If I am present in the OR where the staff – from the nurses to the doctors – have been absolutely wonderful, I begin to think I'd prefer to go into surgery. But I already know that after my experience in the ICU, I also thought I'd like that. So now I'm going to want to be a surgeon too! Working with people

is very important. That's why after completing my studies I would like to join a large hospital where I can learn as much as possible,” he says.

Why did he decide to study medicine? His unequivocal answer is that it's “sexy”. He adds: “Medicine takes a lot of work, in fact, you have to educate yourself all your life.” Being prepared and self-educating, is something he says medicine and guiding at Kuks have in common.

“As a guide, you repeat the same old lines over and over again. There are known facts, and I simply have to present them. But how I can engage visitors and whether I can pull them in is up to me. Fortunately, there are many more people who ask questions and motivate me to perform my best,” he says. He admits that when he's had a long day at Kuks, he might not be up to the usual banter at home, preferring to play the quiet game, to hole himself up in his room while the rest of the family shrugs and says “He just had a rough day.”

**Jaroslav Matějka** comes from Vičkovice, in the Podkrkonoší region. After graduating from high school in Dvůr Králové nad Labem and spending a year at the Institute of Language and Vocational Training of Charles University, he began studies at the Third Faculty of Medicine of Charles University; he is now in his fourth year. When he needs to forget – about Kuks and medicine – he goes hiking in the Krkonoše Mountains. “Or I disappear somewhere over the border. All the money I earn in Kuks goes to travel, which I love,” he says.



# A lifelong **passion** for science

**“New technologies present enormous opportunities, but also risks. They can provide huge amounts of data, but sometimes the biological component disappears. I have always been fascinated by basic mechanisms and to understand how things work inside the cell. And sometimes even completely banal experiments are enough to do that,”** says cell biologist Jiří Bártek, the most cited Czech scientist awarded an honorary doctorate from Charles University in 2022.

STORY BY Pavla Hubálková PHOTOS BY Vladimír Šigut, Tomas Bertelsen

**In October, you received an honorary degree and the title of Dr.h.c. of Charles University in the field of medical science for pioneering discoveries in the field of cell biology and cancer and for your long-term assistance to Czech science. How did you feel?**

It is an honour that I appreciate very much. It was wonderful because it gave me the chance to visit back home and meet friends as well as many new faces that I appreciate all the more after the Covid pandemic. It is also encouraging as well as a commitment that Charles University and the Czech Republic are still counting on me.

**You mentioned in your speech that receiving the doctorate was an incentive for further cooperation. Do you have any concrete plans?**

Although I have been working abroad for almost 30 years, I am still in contact with Czech institutions – we cooperate on numerous projects, I come here

to give lectures, and Czech students come to my laboratories abroad. With Olomouc, for example, we now have a number of plans to go into practice, into cancer treatment. With Charles University, it is mainly cooperation on basic cancer research, but also on the aging process.

**The list of your research topics and discoveries is enormous and overwhelming. If you had to pick one project that is significant to you, which one would it be?**

That’s a really hard question, but what I consider significant, based not only on my own feelings but also on feedback from the scientific community, is something we call replication stress. We’ve been able to discover what drives tumour development and published two papers on this in *Nature* about 15 years ago. Cancer is a multi-step affair, and we described that the first change – usually the activation of an oncogene caused by, for example, the presence of toxic substances in the environment,

smoking, radiation or a metabolic change – causes chaos in the process of genomic DNA replication, replication stress, which the cell detects. And it responds to this “danger of tumour transformation” state.

The cell tries to solve the problem, but if the changes in the DNA are too great, it will commit suicide rather than endanger the whole organism. The problem arises when these control mechanisms stop working, this then leads to uncontrolled cancerous division, which produces further stress, chromosomal breaks and DNA mutations. We can measure replication stress and, as it is specific only to cancer cells, this has opened up a new area of research and also pointed to the possibility of treating tumours. Today there are already hundreds of follow-up papers on this topic, which makes us very happy because we actually started this new research direction.

**You also mentioned in your address at CU that you are pleased that you have spurred competition over the years.**

Yes, that is true. We have been able to discover and develop several research lines that did not exist before. My groups have always been very international – there have been times when I have had people from 13 different countries in one group! So nowadays my students are really all over the world, which of course is the competition – we’re competing for the same grants, but at the same time it’s wonderful and I’m extremely pleased that it ensures continuity of research on these topics.

**How much has the whole field of cancer biology changed during your career?**

A lot has changed. In terms of technology and new methods, we have seen a complete revolution that we never dreamed of. It brings new research opportunities, but at the same time it has an impact on the way science is done. One can no longer be an expert in everything and large interdisciplinary teams are needed. Which is sometimes funny when you see publications with hundreds of authors... It’s a thing of the past when key discoveries, even Nobel Prize-winning discoveries, were made by one person alone or by a very small group.

But technology also presents inherent risks: it tempts us to produce huge amounts of data from which the biological essence disappears – why? The thing that has fascinated me most about science

**I’m very happy to work with my wife: in the beginning I worked so much that if we hadn’t worked together we would hardly have seen each other...**

from the beginning is the basic biological mechanisms, trying to understand how things work in the cell. And sometimes even very simple experiments are enough to do that. I try to teach this way of thinking to my students as well.

And a big change is the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) rules, for example, which complicate clinical research in a huge way. In Denmark, the situation is really critical; there is a risk that such research projects will be very limited or even stopped because there are too many obstacles. This may hinder the development of new drugs, but it also reduces our scientific competitiveness, because non-European countries do not have such strict rules.

**As the most cited Czech scientist, how do you perceive scientometrics? Do you consider it important?**

It is certainly a useful thing, but it has its limits. If there was something better, something else would probably be used, but so far no better “metric” for scientific productivity has emerged. One should keep in mind that scientometrics can be manipulated to some extent and one can artificially increase one’s citation rate. Some people are already taking advantage of this and writing review articles instead of articles about their own discoveries. And this spins a vicious circle, because publications are only allowed a limited number of citations, so instead of original work – and real discoveries – you are forced to cite review articles.

**You work closely with your wife, Jiřina, on some of your research, and your children are also working in science. What do your family get-togethers look like?**

In recent years, everything revolves around the grandchildren, so it’s not so different from other family gatherings. But to a certain extent, our scientific passion shows. My son is a neurosurgeon, he works at the Karolinska Institutet hospital and we collaborate directly on a number of projects. It’s a perfect combination of research in the lab and clinical practice. My daughter is more into environmental issues: she is currently working on the issue of bacterial resistance to antibiotics, which is a huge problem. We discuss science with her too and I’m happy to learn about what she’s working on at the moment, and in return I can hopefully give advice on project strategy or grant applications, for example.

And I’m very happy to work with my wife: in the beginning I worked so much that if we hadn’t worked together we would hardly have seen each other... It’s an advantage that we both know the scientific environment, we have a common goal and we know that when you want to achieve something, it comes with some sacrifices. Moreover, my wife comes from a family of scientists, so she knew what she was getting into (*smiles*).

**Professor Jiří Bártek with Professor Jacques J. M. van Dongen – awarded honorary degrees in October 2022 at Charles University recognising outstanding contributions in their fields.**



**You have long been talked about as a possible candidate for a Nobel Prize, practically the only one of Czech origin. Do you ever admit this possibility?**

I don’t think about that at all. Anything can happen, but the chance is extremely small. One of the laboratories I run in parallel is at Karolinska University in Stockholm, where the Nobel Committee for Physiology and Medicine is based, and which selects from several hundred nominations every year. The members of the committee spend many months on this, it is a very thankless job. Occasionally, I am asked to come in as an external member and do a review of one of the nominations, and even that takes a lot of time.

**You also mentioned in your speech that you were very motivated by the biographies of famous doctors and scientists. Do you have any favourites that young scientists today should read about?**

There are many examples, and I go back to them from time to time. They are the stories of Pasteur, Koch, Fleming, or Banting, who discovered insulin, and many others. For example, the story of Hans Selye, a physician, biologist, chemist and endocrinologist of Austrian-Hungarian origin, who also studied in Prague and in his book *From Dream to Discovery* (published in Czech as *K záhadám vědy* by Orbis, 1975) describes how he worked – how he discovered stress, what motivated him, how he assessed the adepts for his laboratory and other valuable insights and reflections on how science is done.

**You have already gathered a lot of foreign experience. What should inspire science in the Czech Republic?**

In the Czech Republic, but also in some other countries, there is still too much administration, which complicates our lives. For example, reporting on grants: in Denmark, when I get a grant very little reporting is required. As long as I obtained important results, no one minds that I deviated from the original plans. In the Czech Republic, however, I have to explain why I used twenty mice instead of thirty... This meticulousness is, I think, very detrimental.

And we should also think more about how to attract Czech scientists who gain experience abroad back to their homeland – to make the conditions and quality of life in Czech science attractive and comparable to those abroad. We could gain a lot from this.

**Professor Jiří Bártek, Dr.h.c.**, is a world-renowned expert in cell biology and cancer research. His research topics are mainly related to cell cycle regulation, the mechanism of recognition and response to genomic damage, and mechanism of tumor initiation and progression, including the discovery of some molecular functional features of cancer cells that can be used as targets for new treatment directions or as potential biomarkers in oncology. He is currently the most cited scientist of Czech origin. His scientific productivity is evidenced by an H-index of 126, around eighty thousand citations and more than five hundred publications in international journals – including the prestigious titles *Nature*, *Cell* and *Science*. He graduated from the Faculty of General Medicine at Palacký University in Olomouc, and received his CSc. degree at Charles University. In addition to his thirty-year tenure at the Danish Cancer Society Research Institute in Copenhagen, he also leads a research team at Karolinska Institutet in Sweden, works at the Institute of Molecular Genetics of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague, and until 2021, he headed a laboratory at the Institute of Molecular and Translational Medicine at the Faculty of Medicine of Palacký University in Olomouc. In October he received an honorary doctorate from Charles University.

# Inspiring the next generation of chemists

**Professor Martin Kotora is the head of the Group of Catalysis in Organic Synthesis at the Faculty of Science of Charles University. Earlier this year, Kotora received the prestigious *Donatio* award – recognising excellence in research, a high number of citations, and publication in top scientific journals.**

STORY BY Marcela Uhlíková PHOTOS BY Hynek Glos



Chemist Martin Kotora considers the prestigious *Donatio Universitatis Carolinae* award, given to truly exceptional scientists at Charles University, to be one of the most important.

“I appreciate it very much! To be honest, not that many are awarded. The last time I enjoyed similar recognition was nine years ago, when I was honoured by the Czech Chemical Society,” the affable professor recalls. In 2013, the society presented him with the Rudolf Lukeš Prize, which is awarded for an outstanding body of original work in the field of organic, bioorganic and medicinal chemistry. Not directly an award but an exceptional commendation, Kotora was also named *Chemistry Europe Fellow* a few years back by Chemistry Europe, an association of 16 chemical societies from 15 European countries.

At the Department of Organic Chemistry at the Faculty of Science, Professor Kotora heads the group on catal-

ysis in organic synthesis. It was there, in a “hidden kingdom” of basement level facilities where organic chemists operate, that *Forum* caught up with the acclaimed researcher. Anyone expecting an erratic scientist running around in a lab coat with a coat sleeve on fire from an experiment (ok, maybe we’ve seen too many movies) would quickly realise their mistake.

## Nobel Prize contender?

Last year Kotora commented for *Forum* on the Nobel Prizes awarded in chemistry. At that time, he said, among other things, that the award for contributions in the field of organocatalysis was not such a surprise; it had been the subject of speculation for some time. In 2022, the Nobel Prize for Chemistry went to the trio of researchers Barry Sharpless, Morten Meldal, and Carolyn Bertozzi (Morten Meldal is from the University of Copenhagen, a partner of Charles University in the prestigious 4EU+ Alliance).

According to Kotora, it is even harder to predict whether the Czech Republic might have a second Nobel Prize winner in chemistry, at least in the near future; Jaroslav Heyrovský won the prize in 1959. “It’s a long road,” the professor says. Asked if he himself might have a chance, he responds with a smile, “I don’t have it in me! The principles of natural science haven’t changed much in the last hundred years; it is not impossible, but very difficult, to discover something fundamentally new. There is also a bit of scientific politics involved, and the Nobel Prize has recently been awarded more for lifetime achievement. I hope I still have a lot of work ahead of me.”

## Inspiring the next generation

Professor Kotora’s enthusiasm for chemistry is “infectious” and one of his strengths has been inspiring an emerging young generation of chemists. In October 2013, he hosted the CRC International Symposium in Prague at Albertov, where Ei-ichi Negishi, winner of the 2010 Nobel Prize, was a guest of honour. And in the same year, he also created the Quo Vadis Chemistry lecture series, featuring renowned scientists from around the world presenting the latest findings in chemistry. “The series is still running. We just had to take a break for the last two years because of the Covid pandemic. But this spring saw two new

**Professor Martin Kotora graduated from the Faculty of Science of Charles University with a Master’s degree in nuclear chemistry. From 1986 to 1993, he worked at the Institute of Chemical Processes of the CAS, where he also received his Ph.D. In the 1990s, he pursued science in Japan and the United States. He was a research associate under the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science Fellowship with Professor Tamotsu Takahashi at the Institute for Molecular Science (Okazaki) and then from 1995 to 1996 with Professor Ei-ichi Negishi at Purdue University. He returned to Charles University in 2000 and is now a professor at the Department of Organic Chemistry.**

lectures and I’m looking forward to continuing,” the professor confirms.

The pandemic also hit research in the labs for several months, cutting off cooperation at least in the initial stages. In fact, various restrictions still remain, although these are currently caused by the worsened economic situation in Europe and around the world. Fortunately the previous pandemic no longer has the reach to threaten a new opportunity of the group led by Kotora to pursue the controlled synthesis of specifically substituted aromatic compounds. “They could have potential use in organic electronics – to make special LEDs, light-emitting diodes with different wavelengths. But that’s a long way off, there’s a lot of work to be done, and it’s not clear whether we’ll be able to achieve our planned goals,” he explains.

## Organic chemistry proved stronger

How did Martin Kotora get into his field? In his own words, he opted for chemistry late, when he was 17. Although he originally studied nuclear chemistry, organic chemistry won him over. His interest in organic compounds led Kotora – a postdoc at the time – to study in Japan. He first spent two years as a postdoctoral fellow and then almost four years in Sapporo at Hokkaido University. From Japan, he moved on to the renowned Purdue University in Indiana, USA, for two years, when, still as a postdoc, he was able to join the aforemen-

tioned scientist – Nobel Prize winner Ei-ichi Negishi – through his supervisor’s recommendation.

“It was an excellent experience, I remember it fondly. I got an overview and was able to compare how things work in the US and Japan. I even learned some Japanese there,” Kotora recalls with a measure of nostalgia.

## A chemist with a skipper’s license

In return for part of the financial reward attached to the *Donatio* award, Professor Kotora intends, among other things, to invite colleagues from abroad to join in research collaboration. “Without the work of doctors David Nečas and Timothéo Cadart, and without the involvement of my students, I would certainly never have received the *Donatio*,” the chemist explains. His international team has 14 members: together with him, there are four Bachelor’s and two Master’s students, two researchers and five Ph.D. students. When there is a rare opportunity for a break from work, he likes to talk with them over a beer.

Nature is also a major part of his life: he loves hiking and his favourite places include the Bohemian Karst. He also loves the sea and has a skipper’s licence. “I mostly sail off the Croatian coast. Twice I’ve taken the boat to the waters around Scotland and Ireland. It’s so windy there! From a boat you see the world in a completely different way than from land.”



A man with a beard, wearing a light blue button-down shirt and dark jeans, sits in the center of a grand, ornate hall. He is surrounded by rows of dark wooden chairs with numbers on the backs. The walls are decorated with intricate murals and wood paneling. The lighting is warm and focused on the man.

# Photo- graphing the **ancient** world

He first glimpsed the ancient world through the viewfinder as a teenager on a family holiday in Tunisia and for David Rafael Moulis it was a turning point. His camera eventually led him to Israel, as a member of a team from the Protestant Theological Faculty at Charles University. Moulis fell in love with archaeology and this year published his first monograph: *Religious Cult in Ancient Israel from the Archaeological Perspective*.

STORY BY Helena Zdráhalová PHOTOS BY Michal Novotný and David Rafael Moulis



Ten years ago, the discovery of a settlement and an almost three thousand year old temple at Tel Moza during the construction of a highway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, caused a sensation. It is easy to see why. The temple's parameters in many ways echoed the description of the legendary First Temple thought to have stood on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in Biblical times. Evidence of which has never been found. When scientists began to uncover the remains of the site six kilometres from Jerusalem so strikingly resembling the mythical Temple of Solomon, it naturally raised many questions. Some were answered quickly: no, there was no way it was the legendary First Temple. That was refuted almost immediately by scientists, but other questions remained. David Rafael Moulis tried to answer many of them in his 240-page book published by Vyšehrad.

**Iron Age II**

The focus of Moulis's interest is the Kingdom of Judah and the religious cult practiced by its inhabitants during the Iron Age II period (from approximately 1000 to 586 BC). In his book, the author takes the reader to particular archaeological sites, most notably an Israelite temple found at the mound at Tel Arad discovered in the 1960s in the Negev Desert, as well as to Tel Moza. Indeed, Tel Arad was the only such sanctuary from the time of the Kingdom of Judah until the discovery of Moza. Moulis also discusses individual altars, incense burners, cult pottery, and various Iron Age figurines that were discovered at other archaeological sites in present-day Israel.

He does not have a clear answer to the question of which cult people actually followed in the Kingdom of Judah during centuries, as there was almost certainly an overlap of old practices and new, official and otherwise. "We can't say for certain who was worshipped in every cultic place. There was a main cult dominant in Jerusalem and another en-

tirely in households where older practices probably persisted. The state cult provided for the running of the state as such, but the people had quite different needs. They saw to these themselves – at local shrines or in domestic rituals. I believe that people not only worshipped the official deity, Yahweh, but that for a time the old Canaanite traditions lived on. People at the time still addressed deities they had worshipped before," he notes.

**Excavation**

Moulis describes the archaeological work he does as part of a team from CU's Protestant Theological Faculty led by Professor Filip Čapek as a kind of "mosaic" that scientists have tried to piece together. The drawback? No one knows with certainty how broad the mosaic is or how detailed... To fit the pieces together correctly, to build a better approximation or model, experts combine all available sources, from biblical texts to extra-biblical records and archaeological finds.

"Reading my work, it might appear at a glance that we can now close the book on what the Kingdom of Judah cult was like. But we still know very little about it. We're working only with what has been found. We don't know what was lost, what did not survive, what may have been destroyed deliberately or removed. We don't have a preserved moment of what life was really like back then, something that archaeologists were able to capture at Pompeii. In making interpretations, we work with our knowledge – we apply our perception of our world to Antiquity – but there is always a little room for error. We can only wait for the next find that will bring us closer to what life then was really like. The fragments we have are tiny, yet the mosaic was enormous," Moulis explains.

The researcher and photographer points out that the approach of the first biblical archaeologists who dug "with Bible in hand", so to speak, has now been overcome. Trying to fit finds along

**The temple, which must have been truly significant in its heyday, is never mentioned: that is a mystery that archaeologists – working together with theologians and other specialists – are trying to unravel.**



with what was written in the Old Testament did not always work and distorted their meaning. "Today, we approach archaeology independently of the biblical text, because we know that it took quite a long time before those texts were completed in their final form. Biblical texts were intended as a lesson, not as a direct historical account. However, it is of course interesting for us to look into the Bible to see what it says about different localities. We can thus get a better picture of, for example, what the relationships between the Judeans and the Philistines were," the archaeologist continues.

Therefore, what can we read in the "book of books"? It is interesting that Tel Moza is mentioned only once in the Bible. The temple, which must have been truly significant in its heyday, is never mentioned: that is a mystery that archaeologists – working together with theologians and other specialists – are trying to unravel.

**A decade of commitment**

David Rafael Moulis has been going on expeditions to Israel for over a decade but his path was not always clear-cut. His profession as an archaeologist and official photographer at Tel Moza was not always obvious although today the 38-year-old Plzeň native is glad with how things turned out. As a student, he had also been attracted by the field of

cybernetics and could have easily opted for the former instead of cultural anthropology and archaeology. However, he says, the allure of the Middle East proved stronger. Perhaps that is why he earlier began to guide tourists around the synagogue in Plzeň and to learn Hebrew.

When he was thinking about continuing studies at university, he applied to several faculties at the University of West Bohemia including the Faculty of Applied Sciences, where he was accepted. He had also applied at the Faculty of Arts, with the aim of majoring in Middle Eastern studies. "I thought I might regret it later if I didn't at least try. When I was accepted, I was surprised... but I didn't hesitate," he says.

Moulis was completely absorbed by his studies that included contemporary Middle Eastern history, literature and art. He increasingly felt drawn to the roots of early civilisation – aspects that had appealed to him once upon a time in Tunisia but also later, during his studies, on trips to Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and the great museums of Europe. "When I arrived at the Louvre and went to the exhibit on Mesopotamia, where I saw in person the artefacts I knew from lectures, I knew this was what I was looking for. I didn't just want to know things from books, I wanted hands-on experience," Moulis recalls.



### A Czech in Jerusalem

He had begun to focus on antiquity and was looking for an opportunity to pursue archaeology in Israel, which led Moulis to the Protestant Theological Faculty at Charles University, where he continued his doctoral studies under the guidance of Professor Filip Čapek. The latter had long included students in fieldwork at sites in Israel, where they were making a difference alongside teams from other universities from around the world. Moulis then spent a year in Jerusalem at Hebrew University, which he describes as a life experience that he still draws on today.

“It changed the way I look at the world and the ordinary difficulties in our lives, which we often give far more importance than they deserve. Here in Czechia we complain too often. Sometimes I feel like we’re afraid to say we’re doing well. When you live in an area where there are problems, and people are surrounded by conflict, you see things differently. It interferes or affects their lives at times,

**It changed the way I look at the world and the ordinary difficulties in our lives, which we often give far more importance than they deserve.**



yet they don’t stress about it, but rather try to be positive and move on. It’s inspiring and Israel is an amazingly diverse country,” he says.

When in Israel, Moulis captured that extraordinary cultural depth in his photographs. “I was attracted to Israel because there is an incredible variety of subjects and situations that can be photographed well: religious celebrations, concerts, there are always performances in the streets and people of different cultures in traditional costume everywhere. I found it incredibly engaging.”

During the year he spent in Jerusalem, Moulis helped once a week to excavate at a site in the City of David. “Part of the site is an archaeological park that is open to the public. It’s interesting when you dig in the beating heart of the city. You have buses driving by, crowds of tourists walking here and there. But when you work there, you get locked into a bubble, concentrating on what you’re digging.”

He would notice his broader surroundings again only when it was time to go home for the day. Looking around, he would spot the Temple Mount, the Mount of Olives... “It’s fascinating that you’re

uncovering a city that has existed for millennia. You just go deeper and deeper into history,” he says.

In free moments, Moulis hit the streets with his camera, wasting not a minute. Over the years, he captured many scenes in Jerusalem, both periods of intense tourism but also Covid lulls. “I enjoy photographing places where cultures meet. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is a great place to shoot, where the sun’s rays hit at different angles at different times of the day and people from all corners of the world take turns coming in. It’s quite a sight. These places were far emptier during the pandemic,” the archaeologist recalls.

### Working with a pickaxe in hand

Although the archaeologist returned to Prague for good, he still travels to Israel with the Protestant Theological Faculty on a regular basis. He still travels with colleagues to Tel Moza, where he became the official photographer for the project last year. This expanded his tasks, balancing between taking photos and digging. “Every morning there I have time to photograph the previous day’s finds: once I finish taking photos I grab a pick and wheelbarrow and begin digging like everyone else. If there is something during the day that needs to be photographed right away, my colleagues call me over, I drop my tools, dust myself off, and grab my camera. And then, in a little while, pick up the pickaxe again,” he laughs.

He documents more than artefacts but something equally valuable: the comradery and commitment of all those involved in the dig. “An impor-

tant part of the job is showing that we enjoy what we do. When someone brings me a find they want to show and want to photograph, and are grinning from ear to ear, it’s such an authentic, genuine thing... That’s what excavations are all about: it is about more than digging in a hole in the sweltering heat. Expeditions bring together people from all over the world who are passionate about what they do. I love photographing them,” David Moulis explains.

**David Rafael Moulis, Ph.D., completed Middle Eastern Studies and Cultural Anthropology of the Ancient East at the University of West Bohemia in Plzeň, and his Ph.D. at the Protestant Theological Faculty at Charles University, where he works at the Department of the Old Testament. He specialises in biblical archaeology – with a focus on the cult in the Kingdom of Judah. Since 2011, he has regularly participated in fieldwork in Israel, not only at the sites of Khirbet Qeiyafa, Jerusalem, Tel Azekah and Tel Moza. He is an avid photographer and his work has been shown at exhibitions in Prague, Plzeň and other parts of the Czech Republic.**



**A beautiful publication: Religious Cult in Ancient Israel from the Archaeological Perspective. Published by Vyšehrad.**





# The Czechs' first female rabbi

**CU alumna Kamila Kopřivová has followed an unusual path. After finishing her Ph.D. in Jewish Studies at the Hussite Theological Faculty, Kamila set out to become the first Czech female rabbi. Her journey is almost complete: she is due to be ordained in 2023.**

STORY BY Jan Velinger PHOTOS BY Vladimír Šigut

Kamila Kopřivová's studies took her to Berlin and Jerusalem, with occasional stops in the UK and the United States. She has taken part in numerous events as a "rabbi in training", which is also her catchy username on Twitter. Some readers will remember her as a past contributor to *Forum* magazine.

## **How long has religion been a part of your life?**

When I was about 10 years old I got a children's bible as a present from my parents and I immediately started reading it. And I remember my mum standing over me saying "You can read it but don't believe it!" And this was the primary question that got me interested in religion because I still carry this question with me. I don't really know why I should not believe in it, I became very interested in learning what "it" was and I am still on that journey.

## **What was your first experience with Judaism?**

What got me interested in Judaism were Martin Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim* when I was 16 that I got from a teacher. I was fascinated by these stories of the Hasidim and very pious religious men that used to live in Poland. I just found the book amazing and I fell in love with it. I think that at the time I was sure that I knew everything about Judaism but obviously I had no idea, no clue, it was just a fascination with something that I found different.

## **You studied at the Hussite Theological Faculty here at Charles University. How did your perception of Judaism change from your first year to your Master's and eventually your Ph.D.?**

Immensely. Coming in, I thought that I already knew a lot. But I didn't. The school really helped not only in understanding Judaism but religion in general. My studies helped me to delve much deeper.

## **Were there aspects that became more and more intriguing over time?**

The thing they tell you right at the start is that you have to learn many languages. It wasn't just Hebrew. As part of theology studies we had to learn Old Greek and Latin, as well as Old Hebrew, New Hebrew and Aramaic. The first year, learning five new languages is very difficult and it can get a little crazy. I think this was the hardest part of my studies: you have to sit for many, many hours at your desk and just learn.

## **You ending up converting to Judaism: was that something you had thought about before?**

I had not. I began my studies as an atheist and I wanted to be a scientist in the humanities. I did

**What got me interested in Judaism was a book by Martin Buber called *Tales of the Hasidim*. I was fascinated by these stories of very pious religious men that used to live in Poland. I just found the book amazing and I fell in love with it.**

not consider joining any religion at the beginning. However, during my studies I attended a few services within the Prague progressive community, and slowly I got more involved and it was kind of a natural process. We used to say that those who started at the faculty with faith, lost it, and those who started without, gained it. That was absolutely my case.

## **It's said that converting is quite a difficult process...**

It is. In my case, it was maybe a little bit easier because I already knew a lot from my studies and I had engaged deeply, so when I came to the rabbi with the intention of converting, I didn't have to learn absolutely everything from scratch. I didn't have to learn Hebrew and my experience was more about learning practical aspects. You have to experience at least one year of the Jewish calendar within the Jewish community. Observing the holidays, the Sabbath, attending services and so on. If you come from the outside and have little previous experience or you don't know the language, then of course it can be very difficult.

## **You began your studies as an atheist and the same was true of other colleagues and fellow students – you don't have to be a believer to study religion, obviously. As a scholar you can study the history and appreciate the different details and nuances... But do you think it's deeper, if you do believe?**

One of the questions that is often discussed in religious studies is whether someone who is a scientist studying religion *should* believe because obviously if you believe in a religion it becomes true for you so the question is whether you can still apply scientific methods to it. There is this discussion of whether it is appropriate or is not appropriate... I would say that for me it was a shift from the scientific approach to the position of a believer.

## **Which makes sense because although you completed a Ph.D., you did not pursue a career in academia. Instead, you chose rabbinical studies. A decision that, I guess, you do not regret.**

I do not. And the reason was simple: I just enjoy engaging and working with people, whereas in academia I would have spent much more time in the office writing articles. Honestly, I know that these ↪

articles aren't read that much and I prefer working with people. So I decided that academia just wasn't for me.

**Is it fair to say that a turning point was your acceptance at Abraham Geiger College in Berlin?**

Yes, I decided to do a second Master's there and I expected it to be similar to my studies at CU. In some ways, it was but there was a shift in perspective: suddenly I had to look at things from the position of a rabbi within the community and I had to think about ways I could use what I had learned to help. The studies became more practical in a way and the theoretical part did too.

**How many different Jewish communities did you engage with and how did reality differ from what you had learned in class?**

Working with communities is part of your studies and I worked with communities in Germany and Israel. You are just thrown into the 'deep end' most of the time: the communities are small and don't have their own rabbis and suddenly you show up and *you* are the rabbi! You may still be a student but you still have to do everything and they look up to you. You may be in your first year and you still don't know how a lot of things are done but still you have to do them! This is very challenging but in the long run also very helpful because through this process you learn so much.

**Were there differences in the communities and their approach?**

Every community is different and that is the challenge. In school, you learn how to lead a service but when you come to different communities, they each have their own melodies and their own customs and approach to doing things. You take what you learned in general and specify a lot.

**Were there any unexpected hurdles? Do people ever give you a hard time?**

People give me a hard time all the time! (*laughs*)

**Why?**

People have questions and, if you are in this position, you are expected to know the answers. But no one has *all* the answers and it's ok to admit you don't always know but that you will look it up!

**Because you are a convert, and also because of your gender and worldview, does that put**

**People have questions and, if you are in this position, you are expected to know the answers. But no one has all the answers and it's ok to admit you don't always know but that you will look it up!**

**you by default within the progressive wing as opposed to the conservative or Orthodox stream?**

There is a stream of Conservative Judaism called Masorti where they are absolutely fine with ordaining women rabbis and have no problem with that. In the orthodox spectrum, it is more problematic but lately there have also been women rabbis in the orthodox world so things are shifting.

**Did you come across opposition at any point from anyone for whom it was a 'problem'?**

Yes. I spent a year studying in Jerusalem and I attended services led by a famous group called Women of the Wall, a group that meets at the beginning of the Jewish month in the women's section at the Western Wall. These women bring their Torah scrolls and their *tefillin* and prayer shawls and they lead services there which, if I simplify, is forbidden. Women should not be doing this but these women want to fight for their rights and to pray in the manner they see fit. So when I attended these services, I was confronted with the Orthodox view and it was not pleasant. People shout at you, they spit at you, they blow whistles in your ear, and it's just horrible and it isn't nice. I felt I had the right to pray there but the experience was not pleasant. I attended to show support.

**At the same time, was there a chance for any dialogue?**

Some of those who were shouting or spitting at us were these Orthodox girls, maybe 13 or 14 years-old, who saw we didn't react negatively and finally asked us why we were doing this, why we were reading from the scrolls, and we explained that we believed that men and woman are equal. While they were shocked by the action, this experience was positive in the end.

**How was your year in Israel?**

It was life changing. You enjoy living there with the people who are your 'own' people in a way. Because suddenly you are not in a minority anymore. Everybody knows what holiday is coming up, what you need to buy. You can get what you need at any corner shop. During Sabbath nobody bothers you and everything just stops. I don't want to say I was 'lucky' but I arrived when the country was locked down. I experienced the old city empty and that was impressive and beautiful and scary in a way.

I came to the Western Wall and there were only a handful of people. I will never get to see anything like this again. Then I went to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre because I wanted to see it. There was no line of people waiting to see the grave of Christ. There was no one.

**What other parts of Israel were you impressed with?**

The desert. The desert was my favourite by far. Really, it was breathtaking. I was in Negev and the silence... is deafening. There is nothing like it.

**I understand it is a 'requirement' but the year makes sense on many levels, doesn't it...**

You *have* to go to Israel to experience learning there because it is very different from what you experience at a German or Czech university. In a *yeshiva*, you are given a text to study with your

study partner. You engage with texts daily in a special way. You find a study partner for essentially the whole year and you study and sit together over traditional religious texts, say for three hours at a time. And the teacher might give you some questions you have to solve. You have to translate for example from Aramaic and sometimes the answers are counterintuitive. Or, you know them in advance but have to work out how a certain conclusion was determined. And this is very important. To learn this way is very different from how you would learn in Prague [or anywhere else].

**You will soon be ordained... are there other Czech female rabbis?**

There are none. There *is* a female rabbi from Poland who is serving the Jewish community in Ostrava, in the east of the country. God willing, I will be the first.

**Kamila Kopřivová, Ph.D.,** grew interested in religion already in childhood, after receiving Bible stories from her parents. Much later, she completed her Master's as well as Ph.D. in Jewish Studies at the Hussite Theological Faculty at Charles University. Deciding not to pursue a career in academia, Kamila opted to complete rabbinical studies. She is due to be ordained as a rabbi next year. Kopřivová's studies have taken her to Berlin, Jerusalem, New York and other major cities. On Twitter, she is known as *rabínka v zácvičku*, where she has more than 8,000 followers. For four years, Kopřivová was a key contributor to *Forum* magazine at Charles University, where she interviewed numerous top thinkers and scientists.



Forum Radio®

If you'd like to hear more of our interview with Kamila Kopřivová scan the QR code to take you to Forum Radio.

# The good old days? Just an illusion!

**In 2018, Pavla Horáková gained literary acclaim for her debut *A Theory of Strangeness*, which won the prestigious *Magnesia Litera* award for prose. The book, with its quirky protagonist, Ada, became a bestseller. Her newest novel, called *In the Heart of Europe*, tells the story of another young woman but this time also her great-grandmother, who grew up in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.**

STORY BY Jan Velinger PHOTOS BY Vladimír Šigut

## **Are there many similarities between your debut and your second novel, *In the Heart of Europe*?**

There are some. Both novels have contemporary female narrators, educated, opinionated women who observe the world around them and come to various conclusions. There are essayistic bits in both novels and both are sort of my commentary on the development of Czech identity, the recent history of this part of the world as well as the human condition in general.

## **One difference is the relationship that the main protagonist in *In the Heart of Europe*, Anežka, shares with her predecessor, her great-grandmother, who lived in a part of Moravia called Slovácko. Some reviewers called it a dialogue between the past and present.**

The two are partners in the story, mirroring each other's lives. Anežka constantly compares her relatively privileged life as an educated young woman at the beginning of the 21st century, enjoying peaceful times in Central Europe – to Kateřina's

life a century earlier. Anežka enjoys the benefits of accessible healthcare, universal human rights and material wealth, while her predecessor, an equally gifted woman, survived two world wars and the communist takeover. The great-grandmother suffered from all kinds of now curable illnesses and lost four siblings to diseases that are now eradicated thanks to vaccination. And Anežka feels slightly guilty about her relatively charmed life.

## **The character of Kateřina is based on your real-life great-grandmother and her own writing.**

She completed a 300-page memoir a few years before her death, when she was very sick with rheu-

**I learned so much about rural life, religious holidays, relationships in her small village and it made me stop idealising the good old times. I no longer think there was any such thing as the “good old days”.**

matism and a heart condition. She was bedridden and in constant pain, so she spent her sleepless nights remembering her life and writing it down for her three children. She was the youngest of 10 children, born into a poor peasant family. Although she was very intelligent and ambitious, she was denied any formal education beyond primary school. But she had a keen eye, a sharp wit and a knack for psychology, and observed the world around her. She also never forgot a single thing and put it all down on paper with what I think was a considerable amount of literary talent. So my source was Kateřina's actual written memoir. She filled many school notepads with her memories, which my grandmother, her daughter, later typed out and eventually I transcribed digitally. Some bits are autobiographical, others are short stories, anecdotes and jokes.

## **What was it like for you to read the thoughts, memories – happy or otherwise – of your own relative that you never knew personally?**

It was eye-opening. Because Kateřina, my great-grandmother, is so far removed from me in time, she died a few years before I was born, I experienced her writing as fiction, not as a family document. And because she was such an accomplished writer, it really does read like historical

fiction. I learned so much about rural life, religious holidays, relationships in her small village and it made me stop idealising the good old times. I no longer think there was any such thing as the “good old days”.

## **Did you recognise aspects of yourself? Or elements you could identify with?**

I certainly identified with her ambition to acquire a higher education, with her hunger for knowledge and her reservations towards the local mores in her village, traditions and peer pressure that nipped all ambitions in the bud in young people, pushing them to conform to the parochial mentality and values.

## **How did you feel about ‘adding’ her story?**

It's an homage to my ancestor, a tribute I'm paying to her talent and fine prose. I always wanted for her to have more readers other than her own family and this was a way to present her writing to the public. With my own commentary.

## **Did you change the historic material?**

I changed very little. I only did some superficial editing, a bit of polishing up, replacing some dialect words with standard ones in order for everybody to understand. I approached the text with extreme respect.



**Another aspect that is important in your novel is the city of Vienna and especially the intertwined history of the Czech lands and Austria. Is it fair to say that it is through Anežka that you connect the dots?**

Absolutely. I was never good at history in school. It was too many dates and names and I couldn't make the connections between them. Kateřina and mainly Anežka helped me to take a closer look at the history of the region and try to understand better what they never taught us at school or to rectify the stories they told us a little differently.

**What did Vienna represent for Moravians 100 years ago?**

Vienna was the natural centre of gravity for them, politically, economically, spiritually. It was much closer than Prague and much more easily accessible by railway. The emperor represented a natural authority, both political and religious. Vienna was the destination of a lot of economic migration and brain drain. For example, my great-grandmother had three elder sisters who were married to Viennese men. Her aunt and uncle lived there with their 16 children, both her brothers spent their apprenticeship years there, her father travelled there frequently for odd jobs.

**Is it fair to say, then, that Kateřina in the book is less than enamoured with political realities in the newly minted Czechoslovakia?**

It was one of the things I found most surprising in her memoir: when she mentions the declaration of independent Czechoslovakia at the end of WWI,

she is far from excited. For me that was something I never doubted. We were taught at school that reclaiming Czech statehood was an unquestionable good, the result of centuries-long aspirations of the Czech nation. Whereas for Kateřina, the new border that emerged between South Moravia and Upper Austria severed her from much of her family. All of a sudden, they lived in a foreign country, she needed a passport to travel there, there were border controls, suddenly she felt like an unwanted foreigner in a place that used to be her capital city. And, as she says, Prague with its celebrations of independence was a distant land, something out of a fairy tale. I believe she never visited Prague in her whole life.

**A lot of readers commented on the Yellow Pages moment in the book, when Anežka finds a copy in her borrowed apartment and sifts through all the Czech-sounding names. That was interesting on its own. But then you took it further, pointing out all the archaic Czech names there that no longer exist back in the Czech Republic. It was like finding a clue in a detective story.**

Isn't that just so fascinating though? You could tell straight away that they were from here but you wouldn't find a single person with that name here anymore.

**I didn't know this about you before, but you keep copious notes. Is it the case that you have material set aside, for other projects, even while most of your energy is focused**

**on one thing? That you have more books planned in parallel?**

Yes, I do. I write down everything, I take notes, copy quotes from books, take pictures, record conversations. Everything can be useful one day. At the moment, I have three Word documents chockfull of notes, just ready to be turned into books. All I need is time and concentration.

**Your great-grandmother's memoir was not the first time you worked with authentic material. You also worked with letters from soldiers from WWI for Czech Radio, which resulted in two radio series and non-fiction publications. Tell me about that...**

Her memories from WWI, her husband's journal from the Italian front and a recording of another of my great-grandfather's remembering his war-time experience in 1916 were the basis for the radio project. The year was 2010, I had those family documents, the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the war was getting closer and I thought that it would be worth it to approach other people who had those kinds of family materials and try and put them together somehow. So I told my colleague Jiří Kamen about it and he came up with a project and pitched it to Czech Radio's arts and culture station Vltava. The result was a 27-part radio show called *Field Post*, each part an hour long, featuring the correspondence, journals and memoirs of Czech soldiers in WWI as well as their loved ones back home. The follow-up were two books based on the radio series.

**It must have been very sobering, when you got deeper and deeper into those stories and realised these people too were flesh and blood, they had similar hopes and dreams but lived in terrible times...**

It was indeed. And again, it made me grateful for having been born into this era. Even though war has recently reared its ugly head again, mind-blowingly close to us.

**We have talked about some of the main threads in *In the Heart of Europe* – but who is Anežka? Without giving too much away, does her investigation of her ancestor's past lead her to a better place?**

To be honest, Anežka for me isn't so much a flesh and blood character but rather a symbol of modern-day Czech identity. She was conceived by her parents during the Velvet Revolution of 1989, her name refers to a Czech patron saint who was canonized in the same year. She is looking for her immediate roots as well as a broader heritage, which makes her similar to the contemporary Czech Republic which seems to eternally be looking for a 'father figure', finding its place in Europe, deciding which way to lean. Anežka has two choices, either to remain living in a small village with her husband



Pretty in pink: Horáková's debut – with its famous upside down portrait – and heart-shaped *weiner schnitzel* (or *Videňský řízek*) on the cover of her second novel. Both are published by Argo.

and in-laws, following a modest teaching career and focusing on her immediate family, or she can step outside and acknowledge her Central European-ness and belong to a wider community of European nations. Just like the Czech Republic.

**We all fluctuate between our comfort zone and a more carefree and impulsive approach and the allure of the unknown... How does Anežka fare when it comes to her love triangle?**

The love triangle isn't supposed to be dramatic and interesting per se. It is a metaphor of the choice the whole Czech society is facing. Either to remain self-centred, gazing at its own navel, or to open itself up to outside influences, acknowledging the injustices of the past inflicted by Czechs on other ethnic groups living in this country. In a way, *In the Heart of Europe* is a coming-of-age story. But not just Anežka's but about the whole of Czech society. Some critics found the climax underwhelming. But as I already said, the book is not about the life story of a concrete young Czech girl, it is about the whole society and its coming of age.



**Pavla Horáková** studied Serbian and professional translation/interpreting at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, graduating in 2000. She received acclaim for notable literary translations from English and Serbian, working also for a number of years as an official interpreter at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival. From 2001–2007, Horáková was a reporter at the international service of Czech Radio. She is the author of the *Sexton Beetles* trilogy for young readers and two novels for adults: *In the Heart of Europe* and her 2018 debut *A Theory of Strangeness*, which catapulted her to literary fame.



Forum Radio

If you'd like to hear more of our interview with Pavla Horáková scan the QR code.

# Covered head to toe in paint

**He has illustrated magazines and books but recently took on his biggest project: a large mural on the side of a four-story apartment building near the Hradčanská metro station in Prague. He is Marek Kulhavý, known in the art world as Mára Čmára (Mára Scribbles). Although he originally wanted to study at UMPRUM, Kulhavý found his way to art at Charles University's Catholic Theological Faculty where he focused on the history of European culture.**

STORY BY Helena Zdráhalová PHOTOS BY Vladimír Šigut

## **Do you deliberately find reasons to go past Hradčanská more often now?**

I have done that a couple times. If you draw something on your computer, you can look at it whenever you want. This is different: you have to go there if you want to see it again. This was a dream come true but I think it will only fully sink in when I have to paint it over next year. Only then will I realise I'll never see it again.

## **Will that be hard?**

Since it was actually created as an advertisement for a drugstore chain, I figured from the beginning that it wouldn't be there forever. I enjoyed working on it, but that's the way it is. I'll have the photos to remember it.

## **What were your aims when designing the mural?**

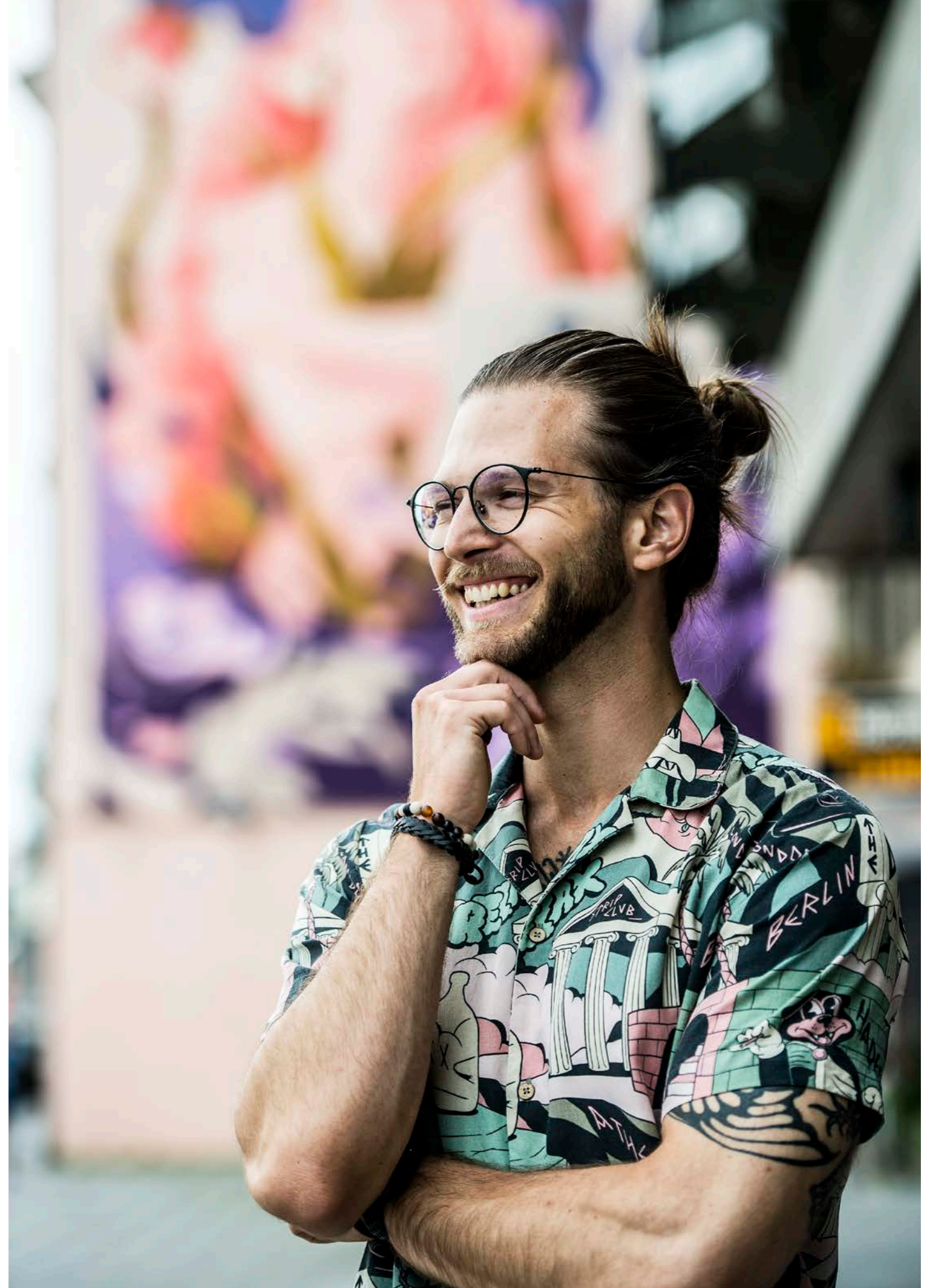
The project brief was "what makes human beings beautiful". I put a beautiful woman at the centre of the concept. I try to live as sustainably and as

ecologically as possible and I'm a vegan, so I connected it with nature. I placed the woman in a wave where there are flowers, butterflies and fish. In my opinion, it makes human beings beautiful when they care about nature and are not indifferent.

## **Is working at a desk different from painting a mural the size of a house?**

Even if you want to cover a whole wall, you still have to start at the table. I first made an illustration from a sketch, which we superimposed on the house on the computer to see how it would look. Tomáš Staněk and Josef Sedlák (who work as the artist duo *Obras Akrobad*) helped me. I couldn't

**When they saw my design, they said I was crazy, that we would never get such a picture onto the wall. However, when we finished the project, they were thrilled.**





**You have to deal with emails, communicate with people, negotiate terms, contracts, prices, and keep track of invoices, your taxes, health and social security payments. Suddenly you realise you have become an entrepreneur and it is a job like any other.**

have done it without them. When they saw my design, they said I was crazy, that we would never get such a picture onto the wall. However, when we finished the project, they were thrilled.

We enriched each other. They were able to try something they would never have gotten into on their own, and I came to the wall in clean pants and shoes, knowing that every line had to be 100 percent precise. At the end, I walked away covered in paint from head to toe. It was physically demanding.

#### **How did you transfer the design onto the apartment building?**

I drew the lines from the illustration, and we projected the image onto the wall. Tomáš and Josef traced the lines. After that, we all used paintbrushes. We tried out different shades on the lower part of the wall, mixing them as needed. I stood by the wall and painted from morning to night. All week.

#### **Do Czech cities and municipalities support mural art – the legal equivalent of graffiti?**

It's not as common here as elsewhere in the world. In Prague, there is not exactly a shortage, but there is not as much as in Poland or Germany. Quite a lot of it can be seen in Olomouc. Now Plzeň is starting to get more of it.

#### **Which cites abroad are more open to mural art?**

In Berlin, you have artwork on every corner. Gdansk or Gdynia also have a lot. In Gdansk, there is a housing estate and every house has a mural. You can go there for guided walks like to a gallery! Czech artist Jan Kaláb has one of his murals there. Gdynia is alive with design. They make beautiful signs for shops, wrought iron gates. It's a beautiful city. In our country, apartment buildings are painted pistachio green or pink. In Gdynia they paint them with simple, clean paint, add subtle lines and it looks beautiful. They think of murals in such a way that they are not just a random painting on a wall but something that shines; they try to make murals fit naturally into the urban environment.

#### **Do you have a dream spot in Prague where you would like to have a mural?**

I'd like to create something in Prague's Smíchov district, where there are a lot of suitable walls and where I lived for 25 years. It would be a kind of looking back at my past.

#### **Any another wish?**

I would also like to try designing an interior, preferably a café.

#### **Do you welcome getting assignments? Or do you prefer creating freely?**

Unlike in the past, it's been hard for me to come up with new ideas lately, so I was happy to get an assignment. But now I'm planning my own project and exhibition. I'm interested in the development of electronic music in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I choose bands that I like, like Kraftwerk, New Order or Joy Division. I used to listen to their music a lot. So the work I am doing now is more personal – a kind of outpouring of my soul on paper, which doesn't happen with advertising.

#### **Do you think of your work as a job or as a hobby?**

Both. Sometimes it's challenging and sometimes it's fun. When you're 18 years-old, you think being an illustrator means only drawing all day and that it's all fun. However, there's a lot more to it. You have to deal with emails, communicate with people, negotiate terms, contracts, prices, and keep track of invoices, your taxes, health and social security payments. Suddenly you realise you have become an entrepreneur and it is a job like any other. Once I am actually drawing, though, I enjoy it.

#### **Are you pedantic in your work? You said your lines have to be very precise.**

A friend who works with me in the studio says I'm a terrible perfectionist. Every line has to be perfect, every dot, line, or asterisk has its place.

**Marek Kulhavý is a graduate of the Catholic Theological Faculty of Charles University, and a cartoonist and illustrator better known under the professional name Mára Čmára. His work combines analogue and digital media. He moved from comics to illustrating magazines and posters. He illustrated the Czech edition of a trilogy about the history of Central Europe by British Simon Windler. He collaborates with the DRAWetc studio.**

#### **Do you keep a regular work schedule?**

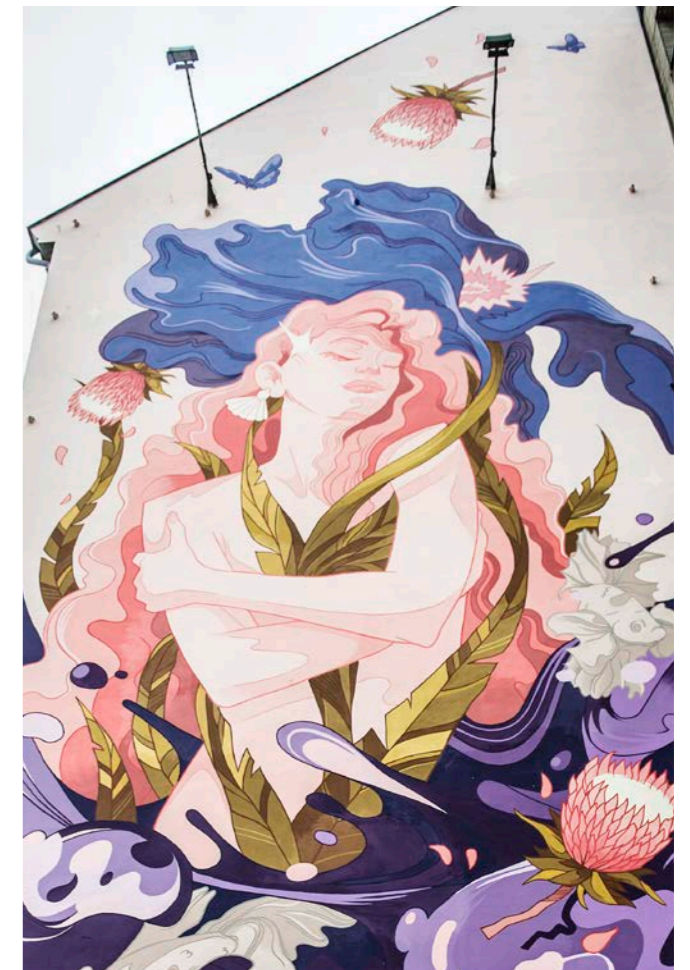
I keep a work schedule. I wake up early in the morning. I try to do sports first because I sit almost all day at work afterwards. I usually finish work around 6:00 pm. Then I don't know what to do. The evenings have been so boring since the pandemic.

#### **I hear you prefer Mondays to Sundays. Why?**

I've hated Sundays since I was a kid. Everything's dead, sleepy, no one's around. On Monday, everybody's alive, things are much more energetic.

#### **Why did you apply to study at the Catholic Theological Faculty?**

I originally applied to UMPRUM (Academy of Arts, Architecture in Design in Prague) and when I didn't get in, my friend suggested the Catholic Theological Faculty since they taught art history. It was only when I started studying that I found out that I had applied for the neighbouring course: the history of European culture – and not for the history of Christian art as I had thought! Which was quite a fundamental mistake (*laughs*). I wrote my Master's thesis on mural art. And I was happy to find my direction there.





# The path of intellectual curiosity

**Jan Sýkora became interested in Japanese culture almost by accident, when he picked up Kenzaburō Ōe's *The Youth Who Was Late* while still in high school. The Japanese, as we know, put a lot of stock in punctuality; luckily, there was no risk of being late at the Japanese ambassador's residence in May, when the Czech Japanologist was awarded the *Order of the Rising Sun* for his contribution of over 30 years.**

STORY BY [Martin Rychlík](#) PHOTOS BY [Michal Novotný](#)

Associate Professor Jan Sýkora from the Institute of Asian Studies at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University has been to Japan on countless occasions. The most influential stay was at Saga University on the island of Kyushu, where he studied between 1991 and 1994. What was it like?

“My supervisor, Professor Susumu Nagano – a leading expert on the economic history of the Tokugawa period – gave me a proper lesson at our first meeting. He called me in to ask what I wanted to do professionally under his tutelage. I began outlining my plans with the utmost confidence. He listened for a while, said nothing, then reached behind, threw a stack of archive material in front of him on the table and said ‘Read!’ in a curt voice. I shuddered and began to explain that I had never encountered anything like this before... When I faltered, he pointed to the door and just said ‘Out!’” Sýkora explains. That was the moment 30 years ago when he began to immerse himself fully in a different mentality and in the Japanese culture of “suggestion”.

## **The Japanese version of Ad Fontes**

The sensei's decisiveness struck a chord: “I stumbled out of the study as white as a sheet and was ready to start packing my bags... The next day, I met Professor Nagano in the hallway. He was grinning from ear to ear, and said ‘So that was the first lesson. If you want to do history, whether general, economic or intellectual, you have to be able to work with primary sources. If you show up at an archive and you can't read basic documents, you'll never bring anything original to your research – you'll just be copying the work of others.’ Then he suggested once a week spending the whole morning with me and teaching me the basics of diplomatics

**My supervisor, a leading expert on the economic history of the Tokugawa period, gave me a proper lesson at our first meeting. He called me in to ask what I wanted to do then reached behind and said ‘Read!’ as he threw a stack of material on the table.**

and working with documents of official provenance. And that's how we met week after week for three years,” Sýkora says.

In 1994, he returned from Saga to Prague, to the newly independent Czech Republic. In the autumn, he began teaching Japanese palaeography and diplomatics as a separate subject, and he still teaches it at Charles University today. “At that time, almost no one in Europe was devoted to Japanese diplomatics (*komonjogaku*) as an auxiliary historical science, so I began giving lectures to Ph.D. students and historians at many universities: for example, in Heidelberg, Zurich, Bochum, Vilnius and Krakow.”

The formative experience of Saga not only led him to an interest in Japanese primary sources, but also instilled in him the necessity of mastering the language fully – a requirement he insists on in his own students of Japanese studies. “You really can't do anything without perfect Japanese, no original work can come into being,” the associate professor says. Over his career, he has now taught several generations of young Japanologists, following in the footsteps of distinguished predecessors Věna Hrdličková, Vlasta Wikelhöferová and Zdenka Švarcová, who, like Sýkora, also received what is one of Japan's highest honours: the Order of the Rising Sun.

**Associate Professor Jan Sýkora comes from Jihlava. He studied at a state language school in Prague taking Japanese language classes taught by Zdenka Švarcová. After the Velvet Revolution, he graduated from Saga University in Japan (1994), completed his doctoral studies at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in History and Cultures of Asia and Africa (2002) and habilitated in the same field in 2011. From 1994 to 2000 and subsequently from 2006 to 2019, he was the head of Japanese Studies at the Institute of Far Eastern Studies at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University.**

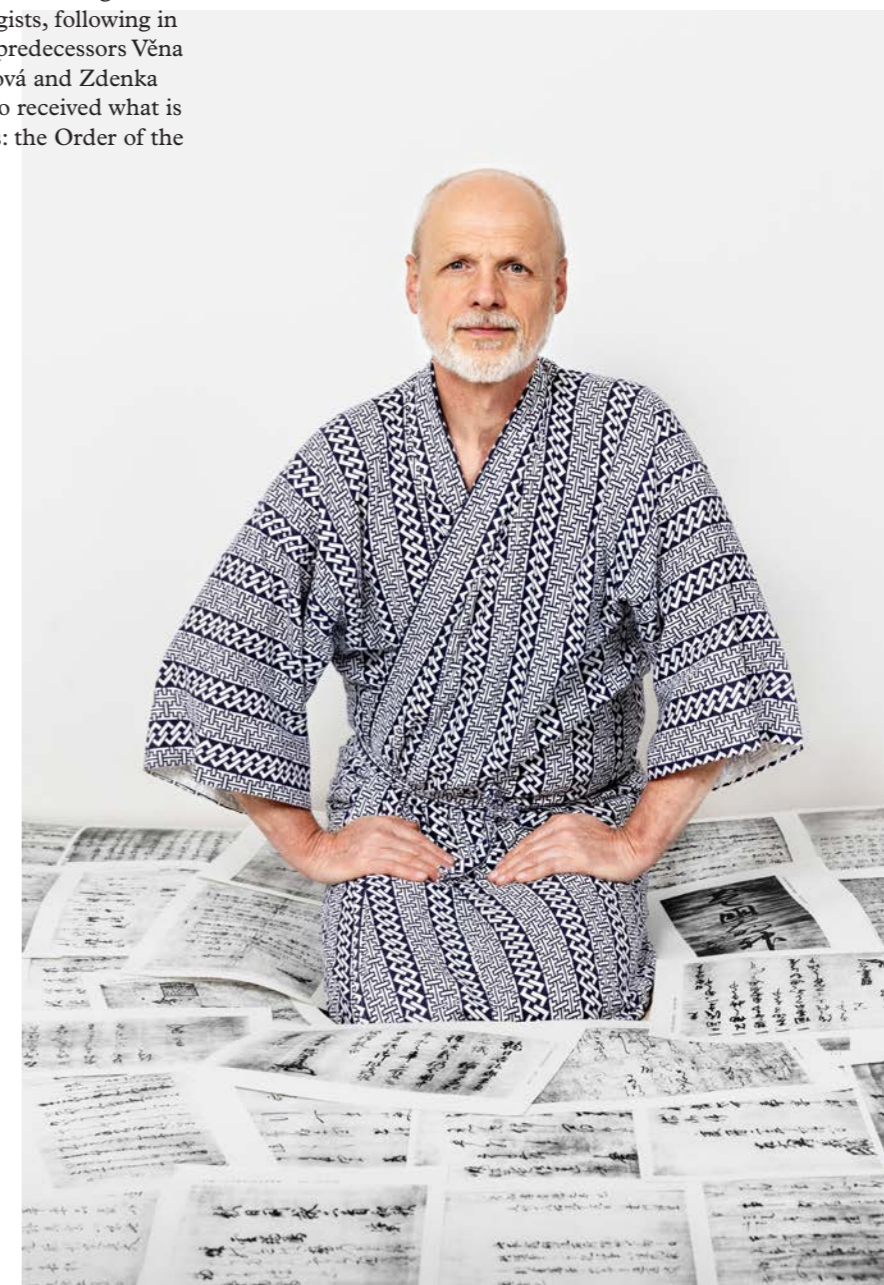
**His research focuses on the socio-economic and intellectual history of Japan as well as on current issues of contemporary Japanese society. He has been a visiting professor at universities in Europe (Oxford University, Universität Heidelberg, Universität Zürich, Lunds Universitet, Vilniaus Universitetas, Jagiellonian University in Krakow) and in Japan (Nichibunken, Osaka University, Kansai University etc.). He is the author of numerous publications and scholarly articles, including the first *Japanese-Czech Character Dictionary* (2000, co-authored with David Labus) and the monograph *Economic Thought in Japan* (2010). He has translated and interpreted – twice even directly for the Japanese emperor himself (2002, 2007).**

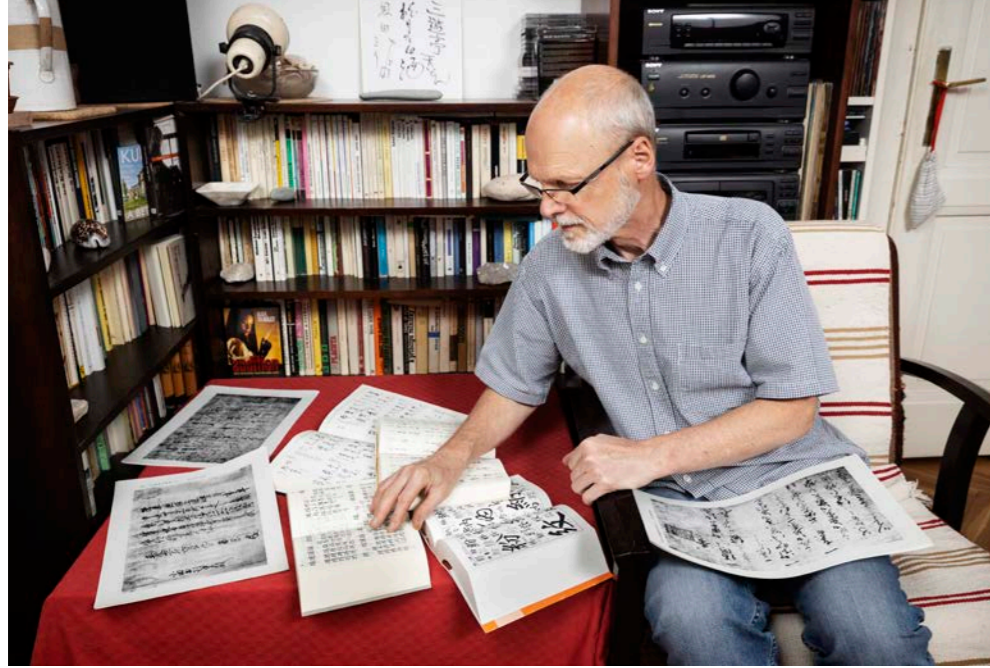
## **What was your reaction when you found out you were going to receive the honour?**

It's a fairly drawn-out process: first the Japanese notify you that you have been nominated. And the first question is whether or not you'll accept it. When I was approached by a former student who now works at the Japanese Embassy in Prague, I at first thought she was joking. Even if it were true, I felt I couldn't accept it. Indeed, I was determined not to accept the honour because I questioned why I should be eligible. Then I realised that it was an award meant not only for me personally, but also for my teachers, my colleagues and the university where I work and in the end I decided to accept the order with humility.

## **Do you receive a certificate signed by the emperor along with the order?**

Yes, the order includes a certificate bearing the imperial seal (*temmō gyōji*). The honour is conferred by ↪





I've always been driven by a kind of intellectual curiosity: how things work, uncovering their true nature; the Japanese call it *kókishin*.

the Emperor, but the administration is carried out by a special office headed by the country's prime minister. Therefore, the certificate also bears the signature and seal of the prime minister.

The actual presentation is overseen by the Japanese ambassador in the country in question. There is therefore a lag in time between the announcement and the official bestowing of the order, which in my case extended to almost two years. It was impossible to meet certain protocolar requirements during the Covid pandemic. Of course, immediately after hearing back in 2020 that I had been given the order, I received personal congratulations from the Japanese foreign minister and other officials.

**On one of your many trips to Japan, you took part in an official visit and met the Emperor, did you not?**

I did. It was in 2007 with President Václav Klaus. Part of the state visit to Japan included a meeting and lunch with the emperor, the empress and the crown prince – that is, today's Emperor Naruhito. There, I had the honour of acting as protocol interpreter.

**How stressful was it?**

I have to admit I don't find interpreting stressful. At least, not until the actual interpreting begins! But I digress: when I went to Japan for the first time in 1986, thanks to the Japan Foundation, you know, the first time I had ever been 'to the West' but ironically it was to the East – I felt very small. Professor Švarcová, who taught me at a well-known language school on Národní třída in Prague, told me a memorable phrase: "Just wait, when you find yourself in need, you will remember things you didn't even know you knew!" If you prepare thoroughly, there are things that are hidden deep in your mind that will pop into your head when you need them in real life.

**Was the audience with Emperor Akihito a "once-in-a-lifetime" experience?**

You don't realise it at the time. When you're interpreting here in the Czech Republic, even at the highest level, you're only focused on your work for a limited amount of time. But when you are abroad you're basically an interpreter 24 hours a day. So it's a kind of permanent tension. It's only when it's all over and you get back home that you realise where you've been.

**There must be a lot of customs and rules to follow at such a meeting. You weren't afraid of a faux pas?**

As far as interpreting for the emperor went, it was not my first experience: I had been approached by the Imperial Household Agency (*Kunaichō*) back in 2002. Back then, a few days before devastating floods hit Czechia, the imperial couple visited Prague at the official invitation of President Václav Havel, and the office in question asked me to help translate press releases and other documents. The first thing they gave me at the time was a booklet of about 30 pages of Imperial Japanese, because Japanese is a socially oriented language that distinguishes several levels of politeness – and one of those relates directly to the emperor.

**How did you – as a kid from Jihlava in the Bohemian-Moravian Highlands – get interested in Japan in the first place?**

I was studying at a high school focusing on economics, but truth be told – I didn't really expect to go to university. When I was about 17, I happened to get my hands on a book called *The Youth Who Was Late* by Kenzaburō Ōe who went on to win the Nobel Prize for literature. It is the story of a boy who grows up during WWII and is determined to defend his country to the last breath. And that boy's world completely collapses with the surren-

der in 1945; he wants to sacrifice himself for Japan, but is "betrayed". And that sense of social betrayal marks him for life. The second half of the story takes place in the 1960s, during his college years; he's an adult, but that sense of failure still lingers in him – he feels uprooted and unable to make social or personal, intimate connections... This book absolutely turned my world upside down! It was a revelation and made me want to understand more about this mysterious country.

**What followed?**

Gradually I got hold of almost all the Japanese literature available in Czech translation. But it still wasn't enough; so I bought the only Japanese textbook available here in those days and started to teach myself in Jihlava. And there were wonderful [typical Socialist-era textbook] sentences like "Poppies are red" or "Brother, someone stole the hoe." It was material taught at language schools, but it was definitely not for self-study.

**Later you applied for and were accepted at the University of Economics in Prague...**

... and I also started going to a language school in 1980. At that time, there were not many people interested in learning Japanese and the school conditioned the start of the course on a minimum number of students, which was not met that year. The quota was five, but only two of us enrolled! That's why, before my first year at university, I convinced four future classmates that when it came to work placement Japanese was fantastic and that they had to start learning the language (*laughs*). Most of them dropped out at some point.

**Not you. You graduated from the University of Economics and in 1985, an exceptional student, continued in Japanology, doing a postgraduate course at the Institute of Economics of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. How do you remember the days following the Velvet Revolution?**

In the days after November 1989, I was contacted by a crew from the Japanese public broadcaster NHK. They asked if I would interpret for them in interviews with key personalities of the Velvet Revolution as well as help with translation. That was a wonderful crash course. I spent the entire turbulent period with their team and got to go places I would normally never have gone otherwise. I saw how reports were filed and sent to Japan and got a look at how the whole media machine operated. Then, in 1991, another chance of a lifetime came my way: a former classmate of mine worked at the Czech embassy in Tokyo and wrote to me that a Japanese university was looking to accept a student from Eastern Europe at their Faculty of Economics. They had one basic condition: the person had to be fluent in Japanese. The combination was ideal. I replied and that was how I got accepted.

**Your life must have changed.**

It did, also because just a few days later, we found out we were expecting twins. And because my brother-in-law is an obstetrician-gynaecologist, he refused to even discuss the possibility of us leaving. So it was with a heavy heart that I returned the scholarship, saying I couldn't come for family reasons. They weren't offended. They did something else. At Christmas, 'my' Japanese professor called me and explained that if I didn't come, my scholarship would be forfeited and the university might have trouble allocating additional funds in the future. He promised us all the care of their medical faculty... In the end, we agreed that I would come alone first and, when the children were born, I would bring my whole family. Then, together with our three children, we had perhaps the most wonderful time of our lives in Saga.

**After your return, as of the autumn of 1994, you became the head of Japanese studies at Charles University. What was your game plan?**

I've always been driven by a kind of intellectual curiosity: how things work, uncovering their true nature; the Japanese call it *kókishin*. My colleagues and I tried to add to the field of Japanese studies at the Faculty of Arts as a basic part of human knowledge that was largely missing at that time: the social science aspect. Most similar courses are accredited philologically, but despite this basic anchoring, the whole field of study ultimately comes down to understanding the country and culture in the broadest sense. If you ask students today what they want to study, they are interested in linguistics or classical poetry, but also in issues of minorities, the crisis of the family in postmodern Japan, pop culture, and economic thought. We therefore rely on the four pillars of our field: language, history, literature and society.

Fortunately, interest in our field remains high: around 150 applicants apply for the Bachelor's programme each year, of which, unfortunately, we can only accept a maximum of 20. I regret that we cannot take all those who meet the demanding requirements of the entrance exam, and to some extent we are "wasting talent", but I also understand that the university has limits.

**You talked about the field. What are your plans?**

I am preparing the second volume of *The History of Economic Thought in Japan*, and I have been working for a number of years on *An Introduction to Japanese Paleography and Diplomats*. I have collected more than ten thousand photocopies of texts stored in various Japanese archives and am processing them for the purposes of the forthcoming publication.



# Bringing a medieval warlord to the big screen

**One of the most anticipated Czech productions this year was the epic motion picture *Medieval* by director and producer Petr Ják. *Forum* talked to the CU graduate and successful former judoka at the Barrandov film studios and learned what it was like to work with world-class actors like Michael Caine.**

STORY BY Jiří Novák PHOTOS BY Vladimír Šigut, Stanislav Honzík

**Medieval, inspired by the life of Jan Žižka, was in the works for four years: when did you first get the idea to make a film about the 14th century military leader who was a contemporary and follower of Jan Hus?**

Back in 2011. A script came to life in collaboration with a few writers I had gotten together but eventually I stepped in and continued writing the story myself. At the same time, I began looking for funding. At first, we raised some 90 million crowns, then it went up to 300 million with the idea that the film would have a global reach. And finally, two months before shooting, the budget went up another 150 million after actors like Michael Caine and Till Schweiger came on board. The actual

filming began in September 2018, with about six months of preparation before that.

**Michael Caine is a legend of world cinema. Was it easier to convince other actors after he signed on?**

Definitely. His participation made it easy to convince others. I also produced *Best Sellers* with him, which was made after *Medieval*, but was released earlier. *Medieval* is expected to be Caine's last film, he is no longer interested or fit enough to make any more.

**Besides *Medieval*, you are involved as a producer in a number of other films. This year**



Petr Jákł with acting legend Michael Caine (*The Italian Job*, *The Man Who Would Be King*, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, *The Dark Knight Rises*). Right: Directing American actor Ben Foster who played Jan Žižka.



**alone, *Wash Me in a River* (starring Robert De Niro and John Malkovich), *57 Seconds* (Morgan Freeman), you were also in the Dominican Republic for a film about sharks. How do you manage so many projects at once?**

You have to have a good team of people around you – otherwise it would be impossible. However, I still have individual producers for each of these projects, and each one is responsible for their own particular film. I get involved by getting the financing plus giving them creative input. The actual filming is up to them. I don't really need to be on the set at all, and when I do visit, I think of it more as fun – if it's an interesting location or there are actors or filmmakers I'd like to meet in person. Otherwise, there's really no need for me to be there.

**How did your background as a successful athlete prepare you for the role of producer and director?**

Completely. I owe everything in my life to judo. Everything I've achieved in my life has been influenced by sport! Although I've always had a strong

will, I boosted it even more through sport and it became my strongest weapon. When I lost in competition, it was because I didn't have it in me at the time. But never because I hadn't put in my all and done everything I could.

**You proved your determination back in 2000 when you qualified for the Sydney Olympics despite the risk of serious health problems.**

Back then, doctors warned me that I might end up in a wheelchair. However, I was so firmly fixated on making it to the Olympics that I couldn't not go. To this day, I still do most things instinctively as I feel them at the time. That was my approach in judo and I never paid much attention to tactics. Emotionally, that was how I approached things. Today, I see how tactics are also very important and I suspect I would have won many fights that I lost [had I relied on tactics more].

I think sport in general helps a lot in your personal life. Judo gave me everything. And my dad, who was the first Czech judoka to compete in the Olympics and is a past national champion, says the same.

**Following in your father's footsteps you also became, for a while, a film stuntman: what was that experience like?**

When you're a judoka, you know how to fall. And that's the first prerequisite for a good stuntman as well. And when my dad wrote the stunt movie *Road to Hell*, he needed some judo guys. So I took part, and then it continued in foreign productions, I worked on projects like *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc*, *The Adventures of Young Indiana Jones*, *Bad Company* and others. But I've never been a stuntman by profession, for me it's always been fun first and foremost.

**You also had a small acting role in the action film XXX. It was so popular, I heard, that people in America recognised you on the street?**

That movie premiered in 2002. While nobody knew who I was before the movie, after the weekend premiere I was walking down the street with an actor who played the sniper, and people were stopping us everywhere and inviting us to all kinds of events. We didn't pay anything at all then, I don't remember taking a single dollar out of my pocket for as much as a coffee. If we wanted to buy something to drink they gave it to us for free! It was unreal!

Back then I had short blonde hair for the role and a lot of people compared me to Dolph Lundgren. Even his manager wanted to represent me, but they wanted me to stay and live in America. But I love the Czech Republic too much to stay in the US.

**Petr Jákł graduated from the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport at Charles University. As a judoka, he is a former member of the national squad. He qualified for the 2000 Olympic Games and several World Championships, coming fifth in the European Championships in 1998. As a stuntman, Jákł worked on films such as *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc*, *Bad Company*, *XXX*, *Alien vs Predator*, and *Bathory: Countess of Blood*. He has directed the feature films *Kajínek*, *Ghoul*, and *Medieval* which premiered in September.**



**My head doesn't shut off at night, I've been on sleeping pills for 20 years. I'm always coming up with ideas, so I've learned to write everything down.**

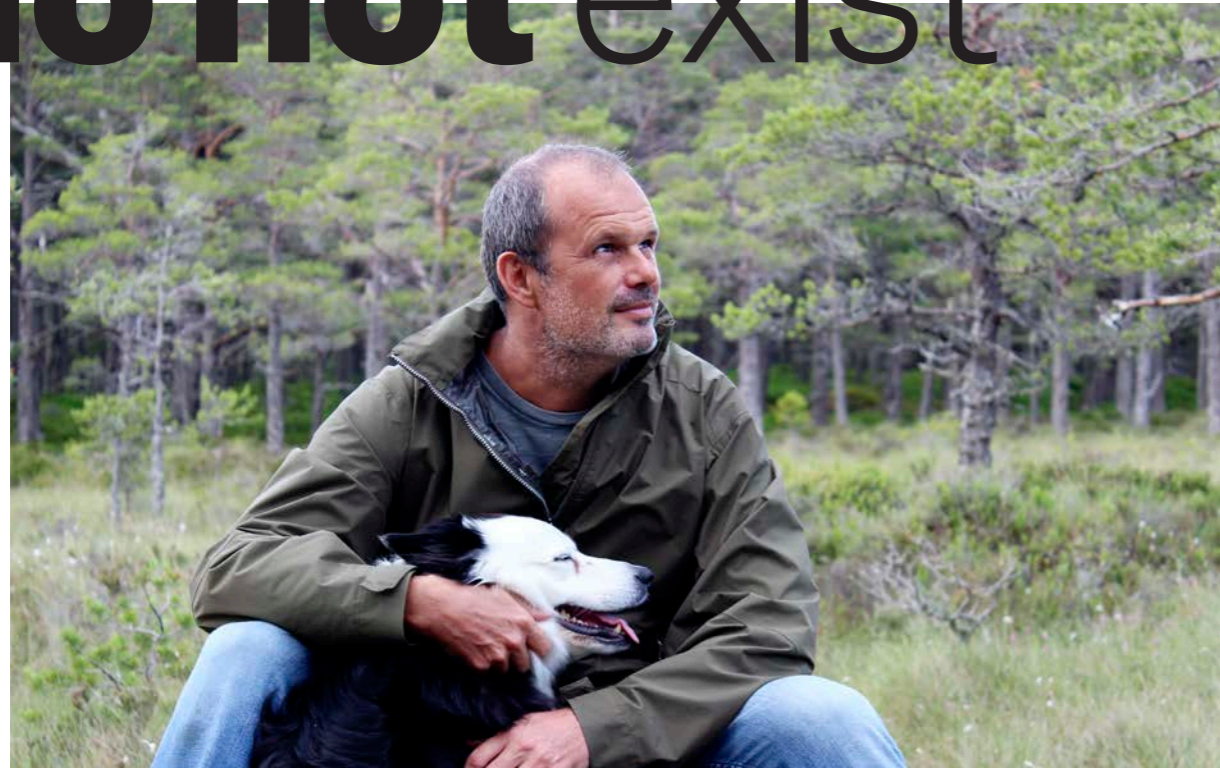
**When you were acting in films by well-known directors, did you try to learn by watching them on set?**

I'm sure I did. I wouldn't have been able to direct films just by saying I was going to be a director: watching how directors worked was just natural curiosity. It didn't occur to me that I would direct, I wouldn't have dared to do that at the time. I've always had a relationship with writing and making things up. My head doesn't shut off at night, I've been on sleeping pills for 20 years. I'm always coming up with ideas, so I've learned to write everything down. And on those shoots, I was interested in how things worked and how to do things, and things gradually fell into place.

**You were inspired to make *Medieval* by films like *Braveheart* and *Gladiator*. But since you are a judoka, what is your favourite sports film?**

*Rocky*. That's what I grew up with. I've seen every film in the series about a hundred times. I used to watch it for motivation during my sports career. If I ever felt like there was nothing left to give, I'd tell myself I had to be like Rocky.

# Silver bullet solutions **do not** exist



**Erik Meijaard is a highly-recognised ecologist and conservationist who has been based in Borneo since the early 1990s. In the spring semester, students were able to attend his course on conservation practices and management at Charles University's Faculty of Science. As the co-founder of *Borneo Futures*, Meijaard discussed conservation issues in Indonesia including saving the orangutan and the impact of deforestation on one the most biodiverse areas on Earth.**

STORY BY Jan Velinger PHOTOS BY Erik Meijaard personal archive, Shutterstock

Orangutans are remarkably ecologically versatile but they are just extremely slow at breeding.



## **You have been working in conservation for your entire career – where did you get your start?**

I started my career in conservation in Indonesia in the 1990s and after my MSc work and my first job was to develop the first distribution map of orangutans. I spent three years traveling across Borneo, mostly by boat on the bigger rivers, and consequently I saw Borneo when it was still largely forest-covered. Of course, especially the lowlands have lost a lot of that forest, so I saw the changes as they happened over the last 30 years. At the same time, I like to state that for species like the ones I work on, we sometimes overemphasise what has happened more recently. My assumption is the moment that humans first walked into their habitat 80,000 years ago was the moment they started to have an impact.

## **You have talked about the killing rate...**

I still maintain that – over longer evolutionary timeframes – an unsustainable killing rate of the apes has probably had a much larger impact than the loss of their habitat, even though we are focusing on that. The killing rate has always been key: the orangutan disappeared from 97 percent of its total range, all the way to Yunnan, China, and Thailand, and because we are so concerned with what has been happening the last few decades, the impulse is to think that the only solution lies with stopping deforestation. Orangutans are remarkably ecologically versatile but they are just extremely slow at breeding. Addressing that killing rate is something we need to focus on and we don't do that enough. So yes, I have seen the changes and it is deeply saddening but at the same time, we need to look across longer timeframes.

## **What drives their killing?**

We conducted Borneo-wide surveys and questionnaires in 2007 and 2008 to get an answer to that. I had about 20 different NGOs visiting some 700 villages trying to quantify the annual killing rate. About half of the killing is opportunistic in nature, for meat. I've never really come across hunters who go out to kill an orangutan but the killing rates are such that hunters in one village kill maybe one every two or three years so it hardly registers compared to number of deer or pigs they get.

However, orangutans are just so slow in their reproduction rate that they can't cope with a one percent per year adult mortality so if you take one adult out of a population of one hundred, that population will go extinct. That's the great sensitivity or weak spot. So probably half of the killings are meat-related and half are in conflict situations, where they are being pushed out of their habitat by tropical deforestation and fragmentation and end up in fields and gardens where people are afraid or angry because orangutans steal their fruit. So they kill or harm them in the process.

## **You are Dutch by nationality – how did you start working in Indonesia?**

I was studying biology at university and an opportunity came up to do MSc research in Indonesia, tied to the historic links between the countries but I didn't know much about the country at first. I enjoyed it there and it is where I have always worked. Essentially, I never left. I try to focus on other parts of the world, such as Gabon. Generally, though, I focus on southeast Asia: Malaysia, Borneo, Indonesia. I've gone really deep into many disciplines to get a very good holistic understanding of what is going on and what the potential solutions are.

**What is it like? Having lived there as long as you have?**

I definitely have a love/hate relationship. A hate relationship because of the troubles it gives me in terms of trying to address conservation issues but also a love relationship: a feel of the land, the people, the friendliness, I know the language very well. I feel very comfortable in any part of Indonesia at any time of day. It's a beautiful country of course, in its diversity, spread as it is across the equator. There is huge biodiversity – I was just looking at some bird species numbers and Borneo has 720 bird species! That's about as many as all of Europe, discounting real rarities that occasionally pop up. But Europe is 50 times larger, just to give an idea of the diversity you find there. As an ecologist and enthusiast there is just so much to see.

But I am not really a typical ecologist. I started as one but became fascinated by the overall system of how geology and human evolution and human dispersal and ecology and history mix to create a hugely complex system that is now changing. It's an endlessly fascinating part of the world to work in and I am sure I will never stop learning – or fully understand it.

**Looking across the many different papers you have worked on, they often seem like very different challenges.**

We tend to think about conservation as being about species but in fact it has only a little to do with them. There's a little bit of ecology in there but conservation is mostly about people, economics, psychology and politics, social sciences... I work with many anthropologists... and that is ultimately where many of the solutions lie. If we want to

conserve biodiversity in the world, we need to significantly change peoples' mind set. Even the term *nature conservation* is a bit daft if you think about it. Nature will be there no matter what we do, we don't need to conserve *nature* as such. If we want to conserve certain species we can if we choose to. Ultimately, it is also about our own survival and finding solutions in how we engage with the surroundings around us. I was reading *Novacene* by James Lovelock and the question is, with current developments, how long will it be before self-reproducing AI surpasses us and no longer needs us. There are all sorts of unknowns.

**Have things gotten easier? Are governments, either national or municipal, more open to different solutions?**

There is definitely more awareness and it is obviously now much more on the international political agenda. Whether the practices have really changed is a different thing but I work a lot in extractive industries like oil palm, timber concessions and mining concessions, and the stuff I am doing now would not have been on the agenda 20 years ago – at all. No one would have cared enough or there would have been a lack of political and public pressure to implement more ecological practises. Things have changed. But at the same time problems have also increased massively over the same time frame. I mean, we can talk about Borneo but the problems are all over: it saddens me when I go back to the Netherlands and I go for a walk in these completely agricultural fields and in spring there is just nothing there.

There is nothing singing in the sky and people like my mum say 'Let's go for a walk in nature,' and



It saddens me when I go back to the Netherlands and I go for a walk in these completely agricultural fields and in spring there is just nothing there.

**Erik Meijaard, Ph.D.**, has been working in the area of South-East Asian conservation science and practice since the early 1990s. His academic background is in environmental sciences and tropical ecology and he has a Ph.D. in biological anthropology. Much of Meijaard's research work has focused on the island of Borneo. Dr Meijaard initiated the *Borneo Futures – Science for Change* programme. Studies conducted under this programme range widely from evolutionary and taxonomic studies to land-use optimisation and community forest management.



it's like 'What nature?!' It might as well be concrete: there is nothing there. That is just bad management: economics rating higher than biodiversity and that is the outcome. The solutions are being found and there is more discussion today, but the problems themselves have also grown much larger. Things have changed and maybe not for the better.

**Does that mean, when it comes to conservation, that steps implemented need to be tailored specifically to local conditions?**

I don't believe in silver bullet solutions: everything needs its own analysis and approach. And coming back to simple answers, sometimes you *do* get it right. The situation can be so fragile that a decision can turn things around. A few years back, in western Borneo we had a battle over a forest area that was home to around 1,500 orangutans. The area was slated for plantation forestry that would probably have killed most of them. We kept pushing and pushing and I wrote a piece at some stage questioning why Indonesia was letting the Chinese kill its orangutans, because we knew there were Chinese investors behind it. And the next day, the ministry withdrew the license, which has since been overtaken by a conservation organisation, and for the time being the large area is safe.

So sometimes the simple answers *do* work and in that respect I do have hope for conservation. A species like the orangutan should not be difficult to save: you just need a little bit of guts and a bit of determination by governments. If killing is the issue, if the president of Indonesia would go on TV and say 'Let's not do this anymore, nobody needs to kill orangutans,' that could solve the problem. Done. You can have a systemic shift – somewhat similar to a supersaturated solution where one small change – an extra crystal – leads to fundamental change – I think that's also possible. Change is possible and I think we can generate change, if we find the right trigger points.

**You just completed a semester teaching at Charles University – how did that come together?**

I saw an ad somewhere that they were looking for someone to teach a course on conservation so I put a proposal together, featuring 20 lectures on ecology, conservation and management, and submitted it and was offered the job. It was a new course designed by me and it was quite labour intensive: two 90-minute lectures a week to be designed as we went. Normally I am very busy and it's true that I am now a little behind. The course was very broad, going from global biodiversity and where it occurs to where conservation problems occur, we discussed island geography, but also got into things like sustainable development, and an overview of organisations involved.

I really enjoyed putting the course together and teaching it and they were quite small classes that provided a lot of opportunities to debate and engage and get views and questions. There were five enrolled students but sometimes other Ph.D. students would join us and the class got a lot larger with people who were interested, even beyond Charles University. The head of the Department of Ecology, Dr. Lukáš Kratochvíl, is such a solid scientist and there are very nice dynamics in the faculty. It was great to engage.

# A magnificent place to stay



PHOTOS BY Vladimír Šigut



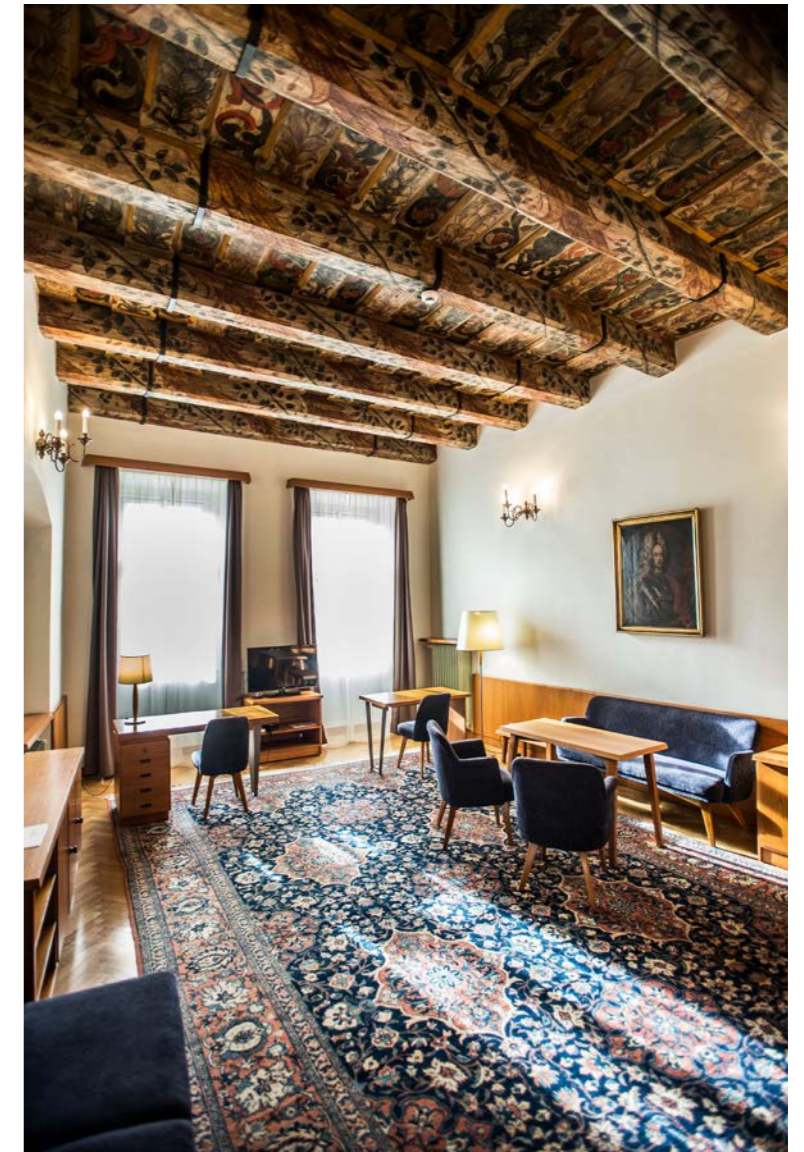
Address:  
Rectorate of CU  
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116 36

Did you know it's possible to spend the night at the Carolinum complex? Charles University not only offers top educational opportunities, but also accommodation. Arguably the most representative accommodation facility is located in the historical building known as Opitz House, a few steps from the Old Town Square.

Located in Celetná Street, Opitz House dates back to the 13th century and was acquired by the university along with other buildings in the area after 1957. Many Baroque and Rococo details have been preserved in the interior; of particular note are the exquisite low ceilings above the staircase and in several rooms.

The last renovations, outlined in a project by architect Tomáš Šantavý, were completed in 2001. Today, the university hotel offers 15 rooms with a total capacity of 27 beds, suites (one fully wheelchair accessible), double and single rooms with private bathroom, TV or fridge at very reasonable prices. Of course, Wi-Fi is free; breakfast is served in the university cafeteria. Guests check in via a modern self-service desk which operates 24 hours a day.

**Věra Barnová**  
Head of the Organisational Department  
of Charles University



## European Commissioner visits Charles University



**24/1** Margrethe Vestager, the Danish politician, European Commissioner for Competition and executive vice-president overseeing Europe fit for the Digital Age, was a guest at Charles University, meeting with experts at the Faculty of Law and the outgoing rector of Charles University Tomáš Zima.

**23/2** Connecting, explaining and an emphasis on personalities and stories were the key messages heard at a conference on science communication hosted by CU. The event was organised by the British Embassy together with Vědavyzkum.cz, Charles University and Forum magazine. The conference was opened by Rector Milena Králíčková and the British Ambassador to Prague, Nick Archer (pictured).



## Better science communication

## Charles University stands with Ukraine



**24/2** The day Putin launched Russia's war against Ukraine, Charles University, responded. "I call on academics, not only at our university but others, to show strong support for free and democratic society, and to say a clear 'No!' to the aggression of war," Rector Milena Králíčková announced. Charles University immediately began preparing aid for Ukraine and its citizens. The school has continued its steadfast support throughout the conflict.

## Metsola debates with students



**16/6** As the Czechs were preparing to take up the Presidency of the Council of the EU, Roberta Metsola, President of the European Parliament, was an official guest at CU. She took part in a closely-watched debate on the future of Europe. Tough questions asked included the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis and climate change.

# Life at CU

**26/1** The country's president, Miloš Zeman, appointed new rectors at Prague Castle, including Prof. Milena Králíčková, who became the first woman to head Charles University since it was founded in 1348. Prof. Králíčková poses with outgoing rector Tomáš Zima and then Minister of Education Robert Plaga (left) and his successor, Petr Gazdík (right).



## Appointment of rectors at Prague Castle



**23/6** Charles University athletes were the queens and kings of this year's Czech Academic Games (CAH)! In the jubilee 20th edition, CU led the standings practically from the first day of competition and eventually edged Masaryk University by 33 points.



## CU dominates at the Czech Academic Games

**29/8** The historic heart of CU, the Carolinum, welcomed German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. The leader gave a much-anticipated speech on the future of Europe, focusing on key tasks ahead – from energy to climate change. Crucial in his speech was the defence of sovereignty and solidarity with Ukraine.



## German Chancellor outlines vision for Europe



## LERU Conference in Prague

**10/9** Rectors of leading European universities gathered in the Czech capital to discuss the future of research-oriented universities and the Horizon Europe programme. Representatives of twenty-three schools that are part of the LERU association and seven from CET7 held talks with Rector Milena Králíčková.



## Science through the senses

**30/9** A record number of visitors, more than three thousand, saw, heard, felt, tasted and touched science at this year's Czech European Researchers' Night dedicated to the senses. Charles University prepared a whopping 80 activities! The evening saw CU student Eliška Jandová win the FameLab national round.



## Success at the Neuron Awards

**16/10** Two Czech scientists whose life's work has enriched global research, one science transfer project and six young scientific talents: that was CU's tally awarded this year by the Neuron Foundation for the Promotion of Science. Six of the nine awards went to Charles University; these included the award for lifetime achievement for Professor Jan Starý – an outstanding haematologist from the Second Faculty of Medicine.

## Events of November 17th remembered

**17/11** Representatives from the country's universities, the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, student organisations as well as the political sphere commemorated the events of 17 November 1939 and 1989. In 1939, Nazi occupiers arrested and sent more than twelve hundred students to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. A brutal crackdown on students, this time by the communist regime 50 years later, sparked the Velvet Revolution that toppled the totalitarian system in Czechoslovakia. "We are gathering together to honour the memory of the students and their brave fight for freedom," CU Rector Milena Králíčková said.



# Master of ceremonies

**During ceremonies at Charles University, you can't miss him: he stands out even among esteemed guests, always the first to walk into the Great Hall in dignified historical costume, sceptre in hand. He is the university's bedel. At the Carolinum, the role is performed by Josef Šebek.**

STORY BY Jiří Novák PHOTO BY Michal Novotný

The bedel, or ceremonial officer, has been a part of Charles University since its founding back in 1348. While the bedel used to be a caretaker who oversaw the maintenance of university buildings, today the function is mainly symbolic. But it is important: it leaves a lasting impression when he dons robes evoking a burgher from the Italian Renaissance. Josef Šebek, a part-time employee of the Organisational Department of Charles University has been working in the university's historic Carolinum for 17 years.

"I first started as an employee of a security agency, sitting at the concierge desk. It wasn't until years later that they convinced me to take a part-time post with the university," says Šebek in a modest office just a few metres from the Great Hall.

Before him, the job was Alois Souček's: he was the bedel until he was almost 80. Following an operation, his successor was chosen. "My first task was to go up to the balcony housing the organ and watch the whole ceremony from above, so I would know what to do," Šebek recalls.

Since then, he has had a number of unforgettable experiences in the role.

"My first big event was back in Mr. Souček's time as a substitute at the Vladislav Hall at Prague Castle in the presence of the Pope himself. Thanks to my role as bedel, I've met many interesting people and visited places I'd otherwise never have seen."

**Josef Šebek** is the bedel at Charles University and the Faculty of Arts of Charles University. He is employed part-time at the university as a member of the Organisational Department, and works part-time at the Prague Public Transport Company. When not at work, he is mainly devoted to his two teenage children.



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The Karolinum Bookstore offers many books in English and Czech including publications by Karolinum Press.

[www.knihkupectvikarolinum.cz](http://www.knihkupectvikarolinum.cz)



The Order of the Rising Sun has been awarded since 1875, when it was established by Emperor Meiji. The rays symbolise the energy of the sun.

The path of intellectual curiosity **46**

