

## Compelling Reading for the Summer Months



**Jiří Šoukal, *Slasti a strasti letních bytů: Život na letních bytech a v letních vilách v éře první republiky*** [Joys and Sorrows of Summer Flats. Life in Summer Flats and Summer Villas in the era of the First Republic], Praha: Academia 2016, 185 pp.

Spending one's leisure time in the interwar period remains an insufficiently explored topic in Czechoslovak history. This fact is somewhat surprising as it is a fundamental socio-economic construct co-determining the functioning of consumer society whose formation is receiving increasing attention across the humanities. Let us recall a seminal work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, by the institutionalist economist Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929), published in 1899, which highlighted the popularisation of leisure time across social groups as one of the prime catalysts of the consumer way of life. It is characteristic that the economist Walt W. Rostow (1916–2003), in his influential book *The Stages of Economic Growth*, sought linkages between the age of mass consumption and radical shifts in the very functioning of the socio-economic system. People cease to address the crucial issues of survival (procuring food, shelter and clothing) and devise alternative strategies for passing free time which they hardly had before. The goal is not so much extensive development but rather intensive improvement of the quality of life and promotion of well-being. Naturally enough, these positive aspects are counterbalanced by a number of negative features, in particular separation of the human being from Nature and moving to an 'unnatural' urban environment, preferring consumer and material life at the expense of social relations and inner harmony, wasting resources, increasing environmental pollution, ravaging the countryside, and anthropocentric extrusion of different animal species. The monograph by Jiří Šoukal promises to contribute to this highly topical discussion and to fill one of the blank spaces on the map of interwar Czechoslovak history.

The author considers the spending of free time in summer apartments (and summer villas) with substantial sophistication. The structure of the monograph is logical: in the first three chapters it proceeds from an initial definition of the somewhat vague concept of summer apartment, through the social stratification of visitors to summer flats, to a short summary of the most important resorts where people headed for summer holidays. Perhaps too much attention is paid to the belt between Prague and Beroun, but it can be assumed that the local resorts enjoyed tremendous popularity due to the proximity to the capital and the attractive landscape. The author's emphasis on the communication lines between summer flats and large population centres (especially railways) is particularly beneficial, literally bringing rural life to the city's population. An equally important part of the monograph is a brief overview of the history of summer flats from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century until their rapid decline after 1945, with a short epilogue, which summarises the developments after 1989. However, the core part of the monograph is the fifth chapter entitled characteristically *Life in Summer Flats*. The author sets the phenomenon in question in the wider context of spending free time in interwar Czechoslovakia. He writes often in a mildly humorous vein which is not detrimental to the text in terms of professionalism. Jiří Šoukal does



not view summer flats only positively. He outlines their negative aspects within the social arrangement of interwar society and does not ignore gender issues.

Not only does the author focus on a topic that had not been dealt with so far, but which was an important part of the socio-economic life of Czechoslovakia between the wars; he made the subject accessible in a highly readable language with an extraordinarily rich visual accompaniment. Perhaps the only drawback is the absence of annotations though it is understandable given the popular character of The First Republic edition of the publishing house. Likewise, it would be possible to formally criticise the insufficient communication between the pictorial attachments and the narration, but this is a marginal deficiency which, in any case, does not diminish the author's argumentation. It is perhaps unfortunate that Jiří Šoukal does not attempt more to work with quantitative data (save for prices of sojourns in summer flats, and a summary of the salaries of professors and civil servants), by which he could shift the issue from the social to the truly socio-economic level. The more popular narrative also calls for the 'reconstruction' of summer stays across social groups rather than a mere description of who could visit the resorts. Although the author took into account the relationship of people to a particular place, he was not much concerned with the changes of the landscape due to summer holidays. Building of summer residences must have meant a forceful intervention in the eco-system which was not reflected only in the lives of the locals but also in the natural order. However, one can hardly expect the author to treat the subject in its entirety.

The monograph by Jiří Šoukal is a fruitful analysis of leisure-time strategies and intermingling of urban and rural environment. This welcome survey of what is nowadays a half-forgotten form of spending leisure time in interwar Czechoslovakia is a valuable contribution to a broader discourse of consumer society, of special importance for defining consumerism more rigorously, and seeking a less injurious model of human society sustainable in the long run.

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