

Prof. PhDr. Jaroslav Peprník, CSc., Ninetieth birthday



This year students and scholars of English from both Olomouc and beyond can celebrate the ninetieth birthday of Professor Jaroslav Peprník. “Our dear Peprník”, as we students of English used to call him back in the mid-1950s, has taught a number of generations of students over the years and those with the keenest interest and enthusiasm have learned to love the subject just as much as he himself does. The majority of his colleagues at the Department at present can boast of having been his students. We have had the pleasure of attending his courses as he rose through the ranks from assistant professor up to full professor. What a trip it has been!

By the time I, along with my fellow students, made the acquaintance of Dr. Peprník in September 1955 in class, he had already experienced truly interesting and dramatic twists and turns, this being a given during those years in our Central European region. There was very little which did not impact our main protagonist.

Jaroslav Peprník was born 11 February 1927 in Ivančice in Moravia where his father worked as a lawyer. After primary school, he attended the grammar school in town but was unable to complete his studies as he had to work during the Protectorate in an airplane factory in the town of Bučovice. He studied German, French and Latin at school, only to decide to take up English on his own after reading adventure stories set in English-speaking countries. He found an English-Czech dictionary and an English grammar and conversation textbook in his father’s library. He thus became yet another Czech scholar of English, along the lines of Brno linguist and Peprník’s lifelong friend Jan Firbas, who also came to the subject *ex privata industria!* This self-taught student was accepted at Masaryk University in the year 1945 at the same time when Dr. Josef Vachek — who served as a great model and inspiration for his students as a philologist, teacher and personally, was beginning his academic career.

The young English scholar’s fate had its brighter moments and its darker trials and tribulations. Prior to completing his studies of English and History in Brno, he received the opportunity to attend a summer course in London in the year 1948. The enthusiastic young man was able to extend his stay in Britain and travelled through both England and Scotland including an ascent of Ben Nevis. Upon returning to Brno, to the Department of English, he began, under the supervision of Dr. Vachek, the work on his dissertation “The Nominal Tendency in Modern English Prose”. The work was printed in a shorter version in *Časopis pro moderní filologii* (Journal of Modern Philology) and Peprník’s long and rich list of publications had begun.

He received, however, a draft notice, not for the regular army, but to “the auxiliary technical battalion” to which “enemy elements” of the regime were regularly assigned. An intense interest in English-speaking countries and bourgeois origins were seemingly sufficient to receive this classification. Our colleague Jaroslav Peprník consequently spent four years engaged in “forced labour” in these units. This was the second time in his life he found himself living in barracks behind barbed wire. (His accounts of his time in these forced labour camps, which we asked him to relate, were truly horrific.)

The year 1954 involved an important transition from Brno to Olomouc. The Department of German and English Philology, led at the time by Professor Ivan Poldauf,



worked to very high standards despite the ideological ‘cleansing’ which took place at universities after February 1948. As students we were well aware of this and were extremely appreciative of Dr. Peprník in his language seminars and linguistic lectures and in his accounts of life and culture in English speaking-countries. Personal destiny linked with fate had something new in store, however, for our colleague Peprník. The tragic events of August 1968 had an impact on all of us. So-called “normalization” interventions came about at university departments and Dr. Peprník was removed from the English department and moved to the Department of Non-Slavonic Languages and later to the Department of Applied Linguistics. Prior to this, however, he was able to travel to England and to the United States for several months where he was able to personally experience the cultures which he had lectured about in such a sophisticated and intelligent manner. In contrast to his colleague Jaroslav Macháček, who was removed completely from the university, Peprník was allowed to remain, but in a diminished capacity. As is often the case, however, this step back actually brought a great deal of fruit. He was able to make use of his experience of teaching English to write a number of textbooks, such as the pioneering *Angličtina pro lékaře* (English for Doctors) (1966 — and a number of re-editions over 24 consecutive years), *Angličtina pro anglisty* (English for Students of English) 1.–8., which evolved into the series *Anglický jazyk pro filology* (The English Language for Philologists), later renamed by the publisher *Angličtina pro pokročilé* (English for the Advanced). His course books *Angličtina pro jazykové školy* (English for Language Schools) (the exercises of which were prepared along with experienced co-authors) have remained popular and influential even up to the present day. The numbers of those who met both with the language of Shakespeare and with the tongue of the globalized world through the course-book protagonists known as the Prokop family would be impossible to estimate. The popularity of “Peprník’s English” was fully comparable with Vachek’s textbook *Anglicky svěže a spolehlivě* (English Clearly and Reliably) from the post-war year 1946. The name Peprník became not only a synonym for English, but also a means of expressing gratitude on the part of students. This was the case when students at one school in Prague decided to give their teacher of English the gift of a trip to Olomouc and dinner with the pleasantly surprised author of these popular textbooks. The author accepted this tribute in “Peprník style”, that is with English humour and perspective.

Jaroslav Peprník was fully engaged at his new workplace. He continued to work as a linguist and also proved a ready and willing organizer. He deserves much credit for his demanding work of organizing summer schools during the normalization years. He brought us into contact with native English speakers, something particularly important for scholars of English and other interested persons at a time when the borders with the outside world were practically closed. Colleagues from various academic fields would often seek out Jaroslav Peprník with requests for translations of extended summaries and even complete books into English. He was unable to say no to anyone, of course. Although the busy translator and linguist went blind in one eye in the year 1986, which put a scare into all of us, his productivity was by no means affected. He published the long-awaited and still useful *Slovník amerikanismů* (Dictionary of American Usage). The scholarly thoroughness involved in the preparation of this publication was truly impressive to say the least, as is always the case with this author.

PhDr. Jaroslav Peprník, CSc. finally met with deserved recognition of his work, as was the case with many others, in the year 1990, when he returned to the Department of English and American Studies. He was consequently invited to lecture and attend conferences both at home and abroad. He became a member of various academic committees and of course supervised both master's and doctoral theses and taught for years at the University of Hradec Králové. He has enjoyed both civic and academic freedom. He was also finally awarded long-overdue academic titles, being made associate professor and consequently full professor of the English language in the year 1999. Apart from offers to provide lectures in English and American culture and lexicology, he also continued his astonishing writing output. (See the bibliography of publications after the year 1990 — *Časopis pro moderní filologii* (Journal for Modern Philology) 2011, no.1). He exhibited a truly remarkable collector's passion when mapping out and gathering interesting facts (which he continues to do up to the present) concerning the English-speaking world and its significance for us Czechs as well as our relationship to it. In order to accomplish this task, one would have to read thousands of pages and study hundreds of documents and I would venture that no one other than Peprník would have been able to do so. Our colleague Jaroslav Peprník is a true Nestor, not only being the most experienced in our branch, but also in a second sense, that involving the original meaning of the word — as a chronicler of Czech-English relations and mutual links between both our cultures. He has also received both academic and civic appreciation in terms of awards and medals from his home town Ivančice, from the city of Olomouc and from Palacký University, becoming — in the year 2007 — one of the first people to be granted the title of Professor Emeritus. And there is absolutely no doubt that the word “emeritus” is truly deserved in his case.

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