

# Jana ORLOVÁ

Silesian University in Opava

## BEER IN CZECH ART

### Introduction

Since any person or group of people can be readily categorized as a follower of such an ideology or as a deviant, drinking becomes a marker of identity and alterity (or ‘otherness’), establishing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, both within a culture as well as between cultures. In this way cultures are not simply objectively identifiable groups of individuals, but self-identified groups which impose upon themselves markers of identity and alterity. Such markers are often reinforced with notions which do not reflect reality, and usually though not inevitably, lead to presumptions of singularity and superiority.<sup>1</sup>

For the Czechs, beer is much more than just a popular alcoholic beverage: it is connected to cultural mythology, national pride and self-identification. Beer and the pub are romanticised in Czech culture on at least two levels: the first is the *topos* of the pub as a place of togetherness and social equality, the other the archetype of the talented artist/drinker. The present study

focuses on both these levels, given that beer and pub culture is a specific socio-cultural symbol for the Czechs, whose reflection is essential for grasping the artistic creation associated with beer. “Beer as a beverage is a cultural element that attracts activities, professions, ideas or artefacts around itself, creating a cultural configuration. By drinking together, by wanting to be together in our free time, we create a sense of mutual cohesion but also of difference.”<sup>2</sup> The Czechs are known for their record-breaking beer consumption, reaching 181 litres per person in 2020, compared to only 96 litres in Poland.<sup>3</sup> However, beer consumption has seen a slight decline recently.<sup>4</sup> Czech alcoholism is deeply intertwined with Czech culture and national identity. As will be shown below, pubs and beer were key factors during the process of the ‘awakening of the nation’ or the so-called national revival,<sup>5</sup> in which a crucial role was played by artists. However, in order for this to be possible at all, there of course had to be something to build on. That is why this text includes a short historical section. In order to achieve a comprehensive picture of the links of beer consumption to the Czech art scene, the study also includes literature and music in addition to the visual arts.

## Beer in Historical and Cultural Perspective

According to historian Jaroslav Novák Večerníček, beer was brewed in the territory of the present-day Czech Republic right from the beginning of the settlement, around the turn of the millennium, and was a cult drink until the advent of Christianity.<sup>6</sup> “After the year 1000, Bohemia exported its hops along the Elbe River to neighbouring countries. (...) Charles IV banned the export of Bohemian hops even under penalty of death and allowed the cultivation of hops only to people with special training. This was to preserve the Czech monopoly on the best quality hops.”<sup>7</sup> The Middle Ages knew two kinds of beer: ‘weak’ and ‘strong.’ The former solved “the problem of the omnipresent danger of water contamination and was drunk by all ages, including children, every day and all day long. The strong beer was then consumed in pubs.”<sup>8</sup> Even then, pubs were already the centres of social, commercial and cultural life, and “every town inhabitant had the right to brew a certain amount of beer and was allowed to sell it.”<sup>9</sup> A major issue was, of course, drunkenness (and related vices of all kinds), against which the author of the St. Wenceslas legend, *Crescente fide* (dated 973), had already railed. In the early Middle Ages, domestic beer production among the subjects was “predominantly a woman's affair,”<sup>10</sup> and women were also the bartenders in taverns. Women also freely frequented the tavern in the Middle Ages, whether they were ladies of honour or ladies of disrepute.<sup>11</sup> The literary composition *The Groom and the Apprentice* from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries contains the exclamation, “Milady, let the beer flow” (and also a warning against immoderate consumption). At the time of the national revival, the situation was considerably less free: women could not enter the pub without male escort.<sup>12</sup>

Beer, as an important part of life, was of course the subject of folk and tavern and couplet songs such as this sixteenth century pop song:

“He who gets drunk in the evening/ he knows it well/ he drinks again in the morning – he'll be as fresh as a daisy. It is indeed mighty sound advice to take a hair of the dog that bit you.”<sup>13</sup> The following satire on the Czech national anthem dates from 1860: “Where is my homeland? Where is my home? / Where there is daily booze galore! / It be no delusion, it be no sham / that I should consider the pub my home. / Not every place is the same, / the voice of nature says time and again / and my heart cries out with much glee, / that I only in the pub I am home and free!”<sup>14</sup> Besides that, folk magic is also connected to beer: many recipes have survived for how to ‘fix’ a spoiled batch of beer; besides incantations and herbs, holy water or the owl's brain were also used.<sup>15</sup> The following ritual is supposed to work on the supposed ‘pest’ of the beer: “Whoever did this to the beer, may the devil bring him here at once and give him no respite, neither on the road, nor in the house, nor on the water, nor ever. And if it be from the Lord God himself, Lord God grant me forgiveness and be a helper to this beer, that in the name of the F & the S & the HS & A. This thing was tried by Adam Tříška at Krumlov Moravský, when he was an under-elder in the year of the Lord 1627.”<sup>16</sup> However, beer was also spoken of in official church ceremonies. For the sake of comparison, here is the blessing of the Archdiocese of Prague in 1699: “Bless, O Lord, this beer which by your grace has come from the grain in order to become a beneficial medicine for the human race. And by invoking thy most holy name, grant that everyone who drinks of it may receive health for his body and protection for his soul. Through Christ, our Lord, amen.”<sup>17</sup>

## National Revival

Beer and the pub played a key role in the constitution of ‘Czechness,’ i.e. the modern Czech nation and the Czech language. One of the most important Czech writers, Jan Neruda, said the following about the U Bílého Lva [White Lion] pub, where patriots liked to meet: “If that ceiling were to fall on us, the Czech nation would be

dead!”<sup>18</sup> The relevance of this *bon mot* was verified by Vladimír Macura, a leading expert on the Czech national revival, according to whom the pub was extremely important for the constitution of the concept of Czechness since it “offered a public space for communication in Czech,”<sup>19</sup> which was not at all obvious at the time. In those days, Czech existed only as a dialect of the lower social classes, and the official language was German. This prominent position applied not only to the pubs in Prague, but also in other Czech cities. The language was the carrier of Czech culture in the broad sense of the word at this time, but the literary sphere was the most important. Macura further emphasises that pubs were also places that served as a site of political struggle.<sup>20</sup> Significantly, the term ‘kocovina’ (Czech for ‘hangover’) at the time meant, in addition to the unpleasant state following alcohol consumption, also “a noisy and derisive political demonstration.”<sup>21</sup> At the time of the national revival, beer was described as a ‘Slavic drink,’<sup>22</sup> but according to available sources, it was widespread across cultures, including Mesopotamia, Egypt and Mesoamerica.<sup>23</sup>

It is true for the Central-European cultural circle that the hospoda (tavern) or pub has been a social, political and cultural *topos* since the Middle Ages, where the lower and higher classes, intellectuals, artists, and workers met. The pub “bears the characteristics of the everyday, of democracy, it breaks the hierarchy of visitors, it is characterised by changeability and chaos.”<sup>24</sup> According to Josef Peřina, there are two basic types of beer society: the first is an association of intellectuals and artists, whose conversations are witty and creative, and the second type is a society of people consuming alcohol in order to numb themselves and fall asleep. In between, then, are various intermediate levels of “beer blabbers”<sup>25</sup> who share a somewhat limited intellectual horizon and an inability to take real action. The reflection of Bohemia as a country where “activity is hopelessly dissolved in beer,”<sup>26</sup> is quite common in the Czech context; beer is thus on the one hand loved and praised, on the other hand associated with idleness and viewed with disdain.

## Švejk as a Symbol of Czechness

In the 1890s, a generation of writers who have been described as anarcho-bohemians entered the cultural space. These rebels and decadents, free from national sentiment, rebelled against the bourgeoisie, practiced free love, toyed with sarcasm and Satanism, and - drank. They chose popular and decadent drinking holes and positioned themselves as conscious hedonistic outsiders. “Drinking was for this generational group an essential and ambivalent reality, intoxicating and self-destructive at the same time.”<sup>27</sup>

One of the most loyal pub-goers of this generation was Jaroslav Hašek (1883-1923), who is the author of probably the most famous Czech book abroad: *The Good Soldier Švejk*. Švejk embodies the typically Czech “opportunism, the ability to survive under any circumstances (and at any cost), the art of challenging the world and outwitting the powers that be with the cleverness of a small man, and the contempt for ideal values that look beyond the benefit of the individual.”<sup>28</sup> The pub and beer are the only place of solace in this novel, a motif that is revived time and again in Czech art. “By going regularly to a favourite establishment, meeting with regular acquaintances and experiencing the evenings unchangingly, one gets the impression that life has an inner order, that there is something stable to grasp onto in case of emergency.”<sup>29</sup> Hašek spent most of his life in the pub, and naturally created his literary works there. In addition to *Švejk*, for example, he also wrote *The History of the Party of Moderate and Peaceful Progress within the Limits of the Law* (written 1911-12), in which he parodied the political conditions of his time. Hašek also took aim at the ‘beer politics’ of the newly formed national self-esteem: “We, the party members, without wanting to defy the general opinion about the necessity of alcoholism, have also sailed with the current of the times and established our centres in rooms where there was good beer. (...) For alcohol is the milk of politics.”<sup>30</sup> He also prepared the party’s poster and election speeches, which he delivered at

the Zvěřinů [Game] Inn in Prague's Vinohrady district.<sup>31</sup> Although there is no documentation of his activities, in the opinion of the author of this study, they could be described as the earliest Czech performance art.

The illustrations to *Švejk* were created by Josef Lada, a close friend of Hašek's. These illustrations definitively crowned Švejk as the (nowadays highly commercialised) symbol of the Czech pub. Without exception, Lada rendered pub scenes idyllically, in a 'folksy' manner, without the use of perspective, with black contours and stereotyped characters, making them somewhat reminiscent of children's colouring books. He produced a number of works on the subject, but the best-known is the figure of Švejk,<sup>32</sup> at first glance a stocky fat man in a battered uniform who is 'so stupid he's clever.' Hašek's Švejk is, however, a much more complex and ambiguous character than Lada's kindly-humorous portrayal: the book contains a number of absurd situations full of sarcasm, cynicism, and mockery. The popularisation of Švejk was further cemented by the film adaptation.<sup>33</sup>

## Beer, Pubs and Visual Arts Before

1948<sup>34</sup>

Bohemian inclinations were of course equally shared by personalities of the art scene, such as Mikuláš Aleš (1852-1913), a leading representative of the National Theatre generation, or the bohemians around the Mánes Association.<sup>35</sup> "When the consumption of alcoholic beverages extended late into the night, the well-behaved Aleš adhered to one practical principle, namely, that it was no use going home before 8 a.m. when the children were not yet at school."<sup>36</sup> In nineteenth century Czech painting, taverns can be found in genre scenes, whether in the aforementioned Mikoláš Aleš, the older realist Josef Navrátil (1798-1865), or the now almost forgotten Antonín Gareis (1837-1922). The scenes are usually idyllic, but there are also caricatures, especially in

connection with the moralisation of drunkenness. Josef Navrátil decorated his favourite Kléblats beer hall in 1848 with epitaphs, and Prague pubs were later also decorated by a number of artists from the Osma (Eight) group.<sup>37</sup>

The Osma group followed the current trends in world painting, whether it was expressionism or fauvism. Strong was the influence of the French scene (as it was with the literary anarcho-bohemians), and Vlček states that the strongest influence was wielded by Honoré Daumier with his relaxed handwriting.<sup>38</sup> Other significant sources of inspiration were Paul Cézanne and Edvard Munch. The decision to hold their first exhibition (1907) of the newly forming group is said to have been made at the Union Café.<sup>39</sup> Although beer was also served in cafés, it was a far more sophisticated environment: daily newspapers or even specialised magazines were often available. Cafés represented a step towards cosmopolitanism. However, this exclusive environment was also more financially demanding, and therefore the Osma members also spent a great deal of time in cheap dives. A pub typical for them was the Jedová Chýše [Poison Hut, located on the outskirts of Prague at the time, which is also where the motif of the *Players*, which the group worked on between 1908 and 1909, was probably created; the regulars were unpaid models for them.<sup>40</sup> In addition to expressionist imagery, there is also a social note in these works. "Pubs are places of mass rituals in which play and fun are unimportant alongside food and drink. (...) Playing games simply allows one to reincarnate, to immerse oneself in 'another being,' to zigzag, to lead the public into rapture and to pretend to be a winner in sweet noncommittal. Play reveals dispositions that remain repressed or hidden under the yoke of normal circumstances. Pub self-realisation (...) takes one away from the axes of the cramped world of needs and worries and views seemingly intractable situations as grotesque."<sup>41</sup> For comparison, I show two paintings from 1908, by Emil Filla and Antonín Procházka, the Bohumil Kubišta is from 1909. Another member of the group, Emil Artur Pittermann-Longen, produced a number of portraits of drinkers and smokers,



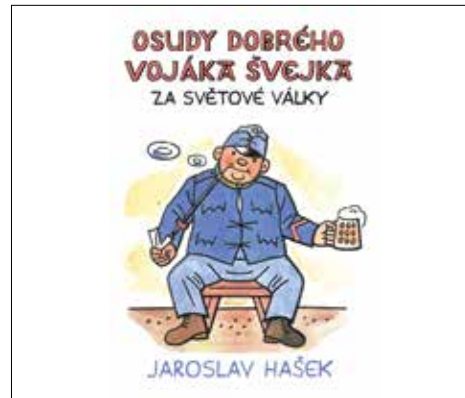
1



2

**Kdo dá hlas,  
obdrží malé  
kapesní  
akvárium!**  
Strana mírného pokroku  
v mezích zákona

3



4



5



6



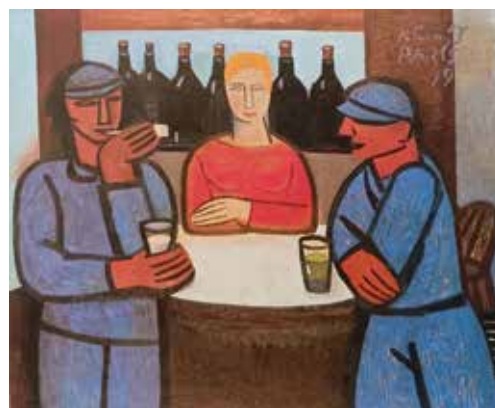
7



8



9



10



11



12



13

1. Josef Navrátil, *Men at the Table - Company at the Table*, circa 1860, oil on cardboard, 38 cm x 32 cm. Accessed August 25, 2023. [https://sbirky.ngprague.cz/dielo/CZE:NG.O\\_14443](https://sbirky.ngprague.cz/dielo/CZE:NG.O_14443).
2. A new year's eve postcard from the beginning of 20th century (Polička Town). In Čenek Zíbrt. *From the History of Beer*. Appendix (Prague: Vyšehrad, 2013).
3. Election poster of the Moderate Progress Party within the limits of the law. "Whoever votes gets a small pocket aquarium!" (1911). Accessed August 25, 2023. [https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strana\\_m%C3%ADrn%C3%A9ho\\_pokroku\\_v\\_mez%C3%ADch\\_z%C3%AAlkona](https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strana_m%C3%ADrn%C3%A9ho_pokroku_v_mez%C3%ADch_z%C3%AAlkona).
4. Josef Lada, *Švejk*. Jaroslav Hašek, *Good Soldier Švejk* (Prague, Cheap Books, 2023). <https://www.levneknihy.cz/osudy-dobreho-vojaka-svejka-za-svetove-valky.html#gallery>
5. Emil Filla, *Red Ace*, 1908, 65 cm x 75 cm In Miroslav Lamač, *Osma and the Group of Artists 1907-1917* (Prague: Odeon, 1988), 78.
6. Antonín Procházka, *Players*, 1908, oil on canvas, 100 x 119.5 cm In Miroslav Lamač, *Osma and the Group of Artists 1907-1917* (Prague: Odeon, 1988), 79.
7. Cyprían Majerník, *Card Players*, 1944, oil on canvas, 44.5 cm x 58 cm. Accessed August 25, 2023. [https://www.webumenia.sk/cs/dielo/SVK:SNG.O\\_791](https://www.webumenia.sk/cs/dielo/SVK:SNG.O_791).
8. Josef Čapek, *The Drinker*, 1913, oil on canvas, 36.4 x 60.5 cm. Accessed August 25, 2023. [https://sbirky.moravska-galerie.cz/dielo/CZE:MGA\\_1059](https://sbirky.moravska-galerie.cz/dielo/CZE:MGA_1059).
9. Emil Artur Longen, *Captured by Alcohol* (self-portrait), 1935. [https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soubor:Pittermann\\_Longen\\_Autoportr%C3%A9\\_1935.jpg](https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soubor:Pittermann_Longen_Autoportr%C3%A9_1935.jpg)
10. Karel Černý, *Interview*, 1949, oil on canvas, 84x100 cm. In Vojtěch Lahoda, Karel Černý (Prague: Odeon, 1994), 80.
11. Naděžda Plíšková, *Comisc*, 1970. In Věra Jirousová, ed., *K.Š. - The Crusader School of Pure Humour without Joke* (Hradec Králové: Gallery of Modern Art; Prague: Central Bohemian Gallery, 1991).
12. Eugen Brikius, *Still Life with Beer I*, performance documentation, 1967. In Věra Jirousová, ed., *K.Š. - The Knights of the Cross School of Pure Humour without Joke* (Hradec Králové: Gallery of Modern Art; Prague: Central Bohemian Gallery, 1991).
13. Jana Orlová, *Beer Drag King*, 2023, performance documentation. Trója Castle, Prague. Author's archive.

including his self-portrait. What they all have in common is that “the setting of the pub is usually only hinted at; the central subject is the figure and its psychological states. The artists usually refer to the space of the pub only by the most economical means; there is rarely more than a table and a glass next to the figure.”<sup>42</sup> The *Osma* and its theme of the card players was taken up a generation younger by Cyprián Majerník (a member of the 1909 Generation). His 1944 work is marked by a muted wartime colour palette, and besides, one can notice a difference in gender — two of the four figures seated at the table are women, while in the *Osma*, when women do appear, they are only in the background, not sitting together with the players at the table.

Josef Čapek, a member of the Tvrdošijní [Stubborn] group, whose best-known works are the original cubist variations, worked on the theme of the *Drinker* after 1918. “In 1918 he depicted the *Drinker* twice; he also created a linocut of the same name based on one of the paintings. From 1919 are the works *Drinker at the Window*, *Drinker with a Cigar* and *Drinker with a Pipe*. From 1920, there is the *Sitting Drinker* or *Man with a Pipe*.”<sup>43</sup> However, even this list is not exhaustive. These works by Čapek exhibit a primitivising tendency and an inclination to create character stylizations. A similar propensity towards caricature can also be observed in Karel Černý’s paintings from the thirties and forties, which, however, are also characterised by a certain dreamy melancholy. His paintings are multi-figured; the characters shown in them nevertheless give the impression of loneliness. In his work, too, women are a natural part of the society of drinkers. While his works from the thirties have a mundane, even aristocratic air, the certain of the paintings from 1949 already reflects an emerging socialist realism.

## Pubs and Cultural Underground

The tradition of pub prose was continued in the second half of the twentieth century by the writer Bohumil Hrabal. A creative method important for him was to sit in a pub, drink, observe events, and eavesdrop on stories. Associated with him is the legendary U Zlatého Tygra [Golden Tiger] pub. In his work, he broke down “the boundaries between the aesthetic and the extra-aesthetic, between one text and another, between the text of the work and the text of life...”<sup>44</sup> A close friend of Bohumil Hrabal was Egon Bondy, who in the fifties developed a kind of pseudo-primitive ‘embarrassing poetry’ and writing in the spirit of ‘total realism.’ Among other things, at stake was a need to break away from the influence of Breton surrealism, which for Bondy in Stalinist Czechoslovakia had lost its relevance. He reacted to the new situation with a desire to express the reality of life as rawly as possible, to accentuate its absurdity and at the same time to distance himself from ideology. He returned to his poetics in the seventies (during the period of ‘normalisation,’ i.e. after 1968<sup>45</sup>), when he became a living legend for the new generation of the cultural underground — especially thanks to the fact that his lyrics were set to music by the most famous of underground bands, Plastic People of the Universe. I use here the term cultural underground (to define a group of people who consciously chose to be outsiders in a communist society, against which they more or less defined themselves, while creating art that they knew they could not officially publish, exhibit, or perform, and thus creating mainly for their own affinity group. In this milieu, of course, were people of varying degrees of sophistication and education, but the common feature was the pub and the drinking of beer (and spirits). The pub once again became a place of relief from oppressive circumstances, a place of joy and togetherness. Especially significant was the connection between the underground movement, beer, and rock music. “The two phenomena have something in common: they let the intellectual components of the psyche rest and intensify

the primal experience, possibly inviting the imagination to develop.”<sup>46</sup> In a poem dedicated to the late wife of the beatnik poet Milan Koch, Bondy writes, “Mirka is no longer visiting / I guess it cannot be / But I know she still lives / In the heavenly pub with Koch she’s drinking / And rejoicing.”<sup>47</sup> Literary historian and critic Vladimír Novotný also associates the pub with the *topos* of the vanished paradise.<sup>48</sup> Panajot Karagjozov also illustrates the importance of beer and pubs in his own recollection as follows: “In the 1980s, the pub was to the Czechs what the church was to the Poles. The pub had an extraterritorial status, it was the existential minimum of freedom, without which the state would simply be gone. The most numerous police presence I saw in Prague was not on May Day or in November 1989,<sup>49</sup> but on the eve of the beer price hike in 1984.”<sup>50</sup> The Czech pub was also (not only) characterised by a specific democracy in this period, where drinkers of various social statuses met.<sup>51</sup> Vinopal notes that “the period of totalitarianism was in a sense similar to the 19<sup>th</sup> century in terms of the degree of political freedom and individual rights.”<sup>52</sup> Beer was also part of official propaganda, with slogans such as ‘beer makes nice bodies,’ ‘beer is our second bread,’ or ‘hunger is thirst in disguise.’<sup>53</sup>

Typical of the Czechs is their creation of so-called pub-table societies. “We can assume that the roots would be found in the old guilds and their meetings. (...) From the 1860s onwards, these formed the basis of local associations.”<sup>54</sup> Alongside the almost loose groups of regulars in the pub, “any other regulars from the pub or even the occasional visitor could join in without offending anyone too much, caste-enclosed table societies were also created, with a multitude of common signs and symbols and complex rituals and ceremonies, whose members occupied various roles and had their own flamboyant nicknames, such as parodied ‘offices’ and ‘functions,’ which were understood only by the initiated.”<sup>55</sup> In 1881, for example, the Mahabharata Table Society was founded, which accommodated literary men (Jaroslav Hašek was a member), artists, actors, and scientists.

In this spirit was also conceived the art group Crusaders School of Pure Humour Without Jokes [Křižovnická škola čistého humoru bez vtipu, or KŠ], which met in the Old Prague U Křižovníků [At The Crusader] pub. The Crusaders School was founded in the first half of the sixties<sup>56</sup> and “brought together unofficial and underground artists with a similar outlook on life, characterised by a specific humour and irony, an effort to connect the everyday with artistic creation and a sense of ‘pub romance.’ In the broad community of Crusaders, members and friends, many events have spontaneously emerged, most of them on the very borderline between artistic creation and banal entertainment.”<sup>57</sup> The group gathered artists expressing themselves through various artistic means, with all united by the themes of the everyday and the absurd, and also... their love of beer. This is naturally reflected in many of the works, or rather concepts, discussed in more depth below.

Beer as an aesthetic medium appears in Jan Steklík and Karel Nepraš’ “continuous action *Beer in Art*, in which beer samples were taken from various pubs and sealed in resin, where they can remain preserved for centuries, or the *Crusaders Calendar* (1972), which consisted of photographs of seated and beer-drinking ‘Knights of the Cross.’”<sup>58</sup> The pub environment was also the setting for the parlour game *Frankie, Don’t Be Angry*, which used alcohol shots as pieces.”<sup>59</sup> This game was also implemented twice in the open air, with the game environment made of beer coasters. In a 1979 text, art historian Ivan Martin Jirous adds that the game *Frankie, Don’t Be Angry*<sup>60</sup> was inspired their feuds with Frankie the pub-owner and that even in the original Crusaders pub, the members of the Crusaders School were not exactly welcome: “The pub is an open structure into which the unpredictable is built in. Moreover, it’s not about the pub owner’s tolerance of the artist’s exclusivity in the surrounding ‘simple world’ – but it’s the constant struggle for existence in the midst of an essentially hostile environment.”<sup>61</sup>



Another member of the Crusaders School, Jan Steklík, developed various forms of ‘Knights of the Cross Love,’ which also included beer love – here partners caress each other with pints of beer – or beer orgasm: the symbolic meaning of beer foam.<sup>62</sup> Poet Jindřich Procházka “took a tablecloth from the table at which the members of the Crusaders School were sitting, with empty and unfinished pints of beer filled with ashtrays, cigarettes, cutlery and money ready to settle the bill with, tied it in a knot and threw it under the table. He then pointed under the table to a bewildered chief-waiter Frankie, who was wondering where it had all gone, and announced that he had just created a visual poem.”<sup>63</sup> Naděžda Plíšková has worked with the motif of beer pints: she has created, for example, a beer comic or graphics with the titles *Half a Pint* and *A Full Pint*.

Eugen Brikcius, philosopher and conceptual artist, was inspired by theology and absurd theatre: his actions were elaborate mystifications. He staged three versions of the *Still Life with Beer*, happening in Prague’s Kampa district: the first in the spring of 1967, the second in February 1968. This was followed by another version in 1991. Art historian Pavlína Morganová interprets and describes the piece as follows: “The entire event, where participants arrived with their own pint [glasses] to fill at the nearest pub, was accompanied by a number of ritual acts associated with drinking beer (pouring beer through funnels from the height of a ladder, ceremonial sipping and incorporating one’s own beer into the still life) and other performances.”<sup>64</sup> Brikcius himself commented on his concept several decades later (in 2003) as follows: “The path to such a still life is simple. First, we are attracted by the glasses on the tables in the restaurant. Since the plane of the beers is obscured by the guests, we have to think them away. In order to make the beer stand out even more – not as a drink, but as an object of aesthetic perception – a final creative step has to be taken: transferring the set of glasses from the tables to a different, unusual terrain. A dazzling still life thus comes into being.”<sup>65</sup> In 1968,

a theatrical happening *Tribute to Master Horský* took place in Ostrava. “The screening of the film from the *Still Life* happening, with the audience looking over their shoulders through mirrors, was complemented by a stage performance by Master Horský. As Master Horský, the poet, the beer-drinking Brikcius’ Muse, put one of the ten beers standing in front of him to his lips, the music began to play. It clearly alerted everyone that the Master was drinking. Brikcius thus presented the act of drinking beer in a slightly grotesque position as a solemn ritual.”<sup>66</sup> Indeed, for Brikcius, beer had both a secular (indulgent, lifestyle-related) and a spiritual-conceptual dimension. Beer, as an ambiguous symbol, was perfectly suited for his artistic puns on the border between genius and banality. In this, he claimed the legacy of Jaroslav Hašek.<sup>67</sup>

## Beer and Song Lyrics

After 1989, the interconnectedness of rock music and beer was transformed into so-called beer rock, i.e. a more or less consumerist combination of simple rock rhythm and elements of brass band or cowboy rhymes. The punk rock band Tři sestry [Three Sisters] is associated with the Na Staré Kovárně [Old Smithy] pub in Braník: the band was founded in the pub and named after it their first album from 1990, *Na Kovárně, to je nářez* [At the Smithy, there’s a blast]. For comparison, below are the lyrics of the song *Jarošovský pivovar* [Jarošov Brewery] by the band Argema (from 1993) and the lyrics of the song *Pivo* [Beer] by the underground singer Charlie Soukup from the seventies. The selected example clearly shows the historical shift of the society’s beer culture: from the crude image of beer as a quencher of existential anxiety, the song *Jarošov Brewery* depicts an idyllic folk rustic.

**Beer**

We shall drink a lot of beers  
 no wonder we shall drown our wits  
 the good guys want our brains to pick  
 we're all sure to become neurotic  
 the good guys want our brains to pick  
 we're all sure to become neurotic

IQ is a worm-eaten apple  
 the beer is indeed fine and dapper  
 beer is the victim of today  
 beer is love of the truthful way  
 IQ is a worm-eaten apple  
 seriously we shall drink of fearful evil  
 at having blood-signed ourselves to the devil  
 we like drinking more  
 we'll wind up at the clinic for sure  
 we like drinking more  
 we'll wind up at the clinic for sure

IQ is a worm-eaten apple  
 the beer is indeed fine and dapper  
 beer is the victim of today  
 beer is love of the truthful way  
 IQ is a worm-eaten apple  
 we're all sure to become neurotic  
 we're all sure to become neurotic<sup>68</sup>

**Jarošov Brewery**

It's stood there for years, to this day it still  
 stands  
 the brewery by the wayside known by everybody  
 for years it has stood there, it will continue to  
 stand  
 whoever knows Jarošov, knows the brewery.

White foam on a dewy bottle  
 this hop nectar I do know  
 I just tried it and had one drink  
 I've been thirsty since then till now.

Poverty, hunger, and fear have come and gone  
 with enough beer, one always could be merry  
 for three hundred years it has stood, it will  
 continue to stand  
 whoever knows Jarošov, knows the brewery.

White foam on a dewy bottle  
 this hop nectar I do know  
 I just tried it and had one drink  
 I've been thirsty since then till now.

White foam on a dewy bottle  
 this hop nectar I do know  
 I just tried it and had one drink  
 I've been thirsty since then till now.  
 Jarošov brewery.<sup>69</sup>

## Conclusion

This study has, within the spatial limitations given, presented a sketch of the complex relationship in cultural and sociological terms between the Czechs and beer, in particular, the place of beer within Czech society and art using examples from literature, and song lyrics as well as the visual arts. It shows that national alcoholism has deep roots directly linked to national self-identification – which in turn is linked to art. Through a selection of examples, the nature of the relationship between Czech beer, culture and art is portrayed in order to show how this was shaped over time, but also how it reflected the current social situation. As it seems, the roots of this phenomenon can be traced back to the historical origins of brewing in the territory of today's Czech Republic and it can be followed through the topic of beer as presented in medieval literary sources. In the period of the Czech National Revival (from the last third of the eighteenth century to the second half of the nineteenth century), pubs and beer consumption played a key role in the construction of modern Czech identity, one expression of this was the literary portrayal of Švejk, who to this day figures as a potent symbol of national mentality. Beer has continued to play an important role in Czech society and art up to the present day. The paper presents some selected examples, focussing in particular on the role beer has had in the recent past in the so-called cultural underground (i.e. the unofficial art scene during the communist period).

For the Czechs, beer is a source of pride as well as shame, which is reflected in the examples given. Beer is a symbol of artistic bohemianism and rebelliousness, but equally of conformity and passivity. Pubs are associated with politics and patriotism (including the constitution of modern Czech and the Czech nation as such), as well as laziness and Czech smallness. They are a democratic space, historically associated with a place (albeit the last one) of safety and stability, a place where one meets regular acquaintances and can escape from the oppressive or hectic everyday

life. For the Czechs, the pub is a place akin to paradise – or one could also say: an escape from whatever one needs to escape from, including oneself. The relaxing effects of beer, the psycho-hygienic possibility to talk or reason without anyone remembering... and the related social and health consequences of alcoholism. Czechs and beer? Love to the point of hate.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Max Nelson, *The barbarian's beverage: a history of beer in ancient Europe* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 3.
- <sup>2</sup> Jitka Soudková, *Beer and Pubs in the Culture of Czech Society* (PhD Diss., Charles University, Prague, 2008), 5.
- <sup>3</sup> "Global Beer Consumption: Czechs consume the most beer per capita," accessed August 9, 2023, <https://finlord.cz/2022/08/globalni-spotreba-piva-cesi-spotrebuji-nejvic-piva-osobu/>.
- <sup>4</sup> "The Czech Republic is one of the countries with the highest alcohol consumption. How much do we drink? And how much do we smoke?" accessed August 9, 2023, <https://medium.seznam.cz/clanek/traveler-cesko-patri-k-zemim-s-nejvetsi-konzumaci-alkoholu-kolik-toho-vypijeme-a-kolik-vykourime-5420>.
- <sup>5</sup> The Czech National Revival is the process of the so-called "awakening of the nation" (or its re-creation by a group of enthusiastic intellectuals) from the 1880s to the second half of the 19th century, a process that was completed with the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918.
- <sup>6</sup> Jaroslav Novák Večerníček, *The History of Beer: from the Birth to the End of the Middle Ages* (Brno: Computer Press, 2009), 97.
- <sup>7</sup> Večerníček, *History of Beer*, 86.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, 96-97.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, 112.
- <sup>10</sup> Zdeněk Žalud, "The meeting and encounter of beer and wine through the eyes of laymen and physicians in the 12<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries," in *Misted History*, ed. Martin Veselý Ústí nad Labem: Faculty of Arts, Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem, 2019), 20.
- <sup>11</sup> Večerníček, *History of Beer*, 116.
- <sup>12</sup> Dobrava Moldanová, "The Pub and People Around It as Seen by Czech Women Writers," *Pubs and Beer in Czech Society*, ed. Vladimír Novotný (Prague: Academia, 1997), 95.
- <sup>13</sup> Josef Staněk, *The Blessed Brewer: Chapters from the History of Beer* (Prague: Práce, 1984), 216.
- <sup>14</sup> Čeněk Zíbrt, *From the History of Beer* (Prague: Vyšehrad, 2013), 264.
- <sup>15</sup> Staněk, *The Blessed Brewer*, 119-126.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, 122.
- <sup>17</sup> Soudková, *Beer and Pubs in the Culture of Czech Society*, 34.
- <sup>18</sup> Jan Neruda, *Pictures III, 1885-1888* (Prague: State Publishing House of Beautiful Literature, Music and Art, 1954), 238.
- <sup>19</sup> Vladimír Macura, "The Pub in Czech Patriotic Culture," in Novotný, *Pubs and Beer*, 29.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, 30-31.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, 31-2.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, 33.
- <sup>23</sup> See Večerníček, *History of Beer*.
- <sup>24</sup> Vladimír Křivánek, "Give them this evening their warm pub, O Lord: Pubs and the Czech Anarcho-bohemianism," in Novotný, *Pubs and Beer*, 116.
- <sup>25</sup> Josef Peřina, "Mr Brouček's Relationship to Beer, or the Image of the Soul of the Czech Nation as Mirrored in the Pint," in Novotný, *Pubs and Beer*, 78.
- <sup>26</sup> Macura, "The Pub in Czech Patriotic Culture," in Novotný, *Pubs and Beer*, 35.
- <sup>27</sup> Soudková, *Beer and Pubs in the Culture of Czech Society*, 80.
- <sup>28</sup> Moldanová, "The Pub and People Around It as Seen by Czech Women Writers," in Novotný, *Pubs and Beer*, 99.
- <sup>29</sup> Soudková, *Beer and Pubs in the Culture of Czech Society*, 75.
- <sup>30</sup> Jaroslav Hašek, *Political and Social History of the Party of Moderate Progress within the Limits of the Law* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1963), 48.
- <sup>31</sup> Soudková, *Beer and Pubs in the Culture of Czech Society*, 80-1.
- <sup>32</sup> Lada had already illustrated Hašek's work before the First World War, but the final form of Švejk's face did not appear until the 1926 book edition (Pavla Pečínková, *Josef Lada* [Prague: Gallery, 1998], 118).
- <sup>33</sup> Thanks to the non-confrontational style and content and the apolitical focus of his works, Lada was a popular artist during the communist period. Similarly, the character of Švejk was very popular, which was reinforced by Jaroslav Steklý's 1956 film adaptation (a year before Lada's death).
- <sup>34</sup> February 1948 is when a communist coup d'état took place in Czechoslovakia.

- <sup>35</sup> The Mánes Society of Artists was founded in 1887.
- <sup>36</sup> Zdeněk Kment, *Pubs and Their Historical Role in Czech society, or, Inns in Bohemia, Taverns in Wallachia and Pubs in Valašské Meziříčí* (Valašské Meziříčí: Z. Kment, 2011), 110.
- <sup>37</sup> The original eight painters were Emil Filla, Otakar Kubín, Antonín Procházka, Bohumil Kubišta, Max Horb, Bedřich Feigl, Vilém Nowak, Emil Arthur Longen-Pittermann, later joined by Vlastimil Beneš, Václav Špála and Linka Procházková.
- <sup>38</sup> Tomáš Vlček, *Honoré Daumier* (Prague: Odeon, 1981), 34.
- <sup>39</sup> Miroslav Lamač, *Osma and the Group of Artists 1907-1917* (Prague: Odeon, 1988), 41.
- <sup>40</sup> Lamač, *Osma*, 160.
- <sup>41</sup> Radko Pytlík, *In the Shade of the Tap: Talks and Fantasies* (Prague: Emporium, 1996) 175-6.
- <sup>42</sup> Veronika Rollová, *Prague Pub – Inspiration for Czech Visual Arts of the First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Prague, Charles University, Bachelor's Thesis, 2009) 22.
- <sup>43</sup> Rollová, *Prague pub – Inspiration*, 38.
- <sup>44</sup> Jan Jiroušek, “The Paradigm of the Pub in 20th Century Czech Prose,” in Novotný, *Pubs and Beer*, 146.
- <sup>45</sup> On 21 August 1968, Warsaw Pact troops invaded Czechoslovakia in response to the political and cultural dislocation known as the Prague Spring. This was followed by a period of *normalisation*, an attempt to return to the frigid conditions of the fifties.
- <sup>46</sup> Aleš Opekar, “The Influence of Beer on Czech Rock Music,” in Novotný, *Pubs and Beer*, 221.
- <sup>47</sup> Egon Bondy, *Poetry Collections 1974-1976; Příšerné příběhy* (Prague: Pražská imaginace, 1992), 114.
- <sup>48</sup> Vladimír Novotný, “The Czech Beer Society and Zdeněk Matěj Kuděj,” in Novotný, *Pubs and Beer*, 122.
- <sup>49</sup> At the end of 1989 the so-called Velvet (i.e. non-violent) Revolution took place; the fall of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. The date of the demonstration on 17 November 1989 is key.
- <sup>50</sup> Panayot Karagjovov, “Requiem for the Prague Four,” in Novotný, *Pubs and Beer*, 247.
- <sup>51</sup> Pytlík, *In the Shadow of the Tap*, 162.
- <sup>52</sup> Jiří Vinopal, “The institution of the Pub in Czech Society,” *Our Society*, no. 2 (2005): 32.
- <sup>53</sup> Soudková, *Beer and Pubs in the Culture of Czech Society*, 22.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, 76.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, 77.
- <sup>56</sup> Věra Jirousová, ed., *K.Š. – The Knights of the Cross School of Pure Humour without Joke* (Hradec Králové: Gallery of Modern Art; Prague: Central Bohemian Gallery, 1991), unpaginated.
- <sup>57</sup> Pavlína Morganová, *Action Art* (Olomouc: Votobia, 1999), 41.
- <sup>58</sup> The author of the photos is Helena Wilson.
- <sup>59</sup> Morganová, *Action Art*, 42.
- <sup>60</sup> Soudková, *Beer and Pubs in the Culture of Czech Society*, 22.
- <sup>61</sup> “[E]ach of the playing parties plays a different colour (brown rum, red griot, green peppermint liqueur, white vodka, etc.; and the discarded dram must be drunk on the spot by its owner.” See Jirousová, *K.Š.*, unpaginated.
- <sup>62</sup> Jirousová, *K.Š.*, unpaginated. Duňa Slavíková, on the other hand, claims that the situation took place at the table of a regular guest who asked Procházka what a particular poem was. See Eugen Brikcius, *And the Body Became the Word* (Brno: Větrné mlýny, 2013), 9.
- <sup>63</sup> Jirousová, *K.Š.*, unpaginated.
- <sup>64</sup> Morganová, *Action Art*, 43.
- <sup>65</sup> Brikcius, *And the Body Became the Word*, 883.
- <sup>66</sup> Morganová, *Action Art*, 45.
- <sup>67</sup> In the preface, Viktor Šlajchrt speaks of Eugen Brikcius’ merging of the Hašek position and that of the creator of bohemian legends (in which he was inspired by the biographies of saints). In: Brikcius, *And the Body Became the Word*, 23.
- <sup>68</sup> Lyrics of the song *Pivo* (Charlie Soukup, 70s). Accessed August 30, 2023, <https://www.karaokearty.cz/texty-pisni/soukup-charlie/pivo-893494>.
- <sup>69</sup> Lyrics of the song *Jarošovský pivovar* (Argema, 1993). You can also watch the video clip. Accessed August 30, 2023, <http://www.argema.cz/skladby/jarosovsky-pivovar>.

## Bibliography

- Brikcius, Eugen. *And the Body Became the Word* [A tělo se stalo slovem]. Brno: Windmills, 2013.
- Jirousová, Věra, ed. K.Š. – *The Knights of the Cross School of Pure Humour without Joke* [K.Š. - Křížovnická škola čistého humoru bez vtipu]. Hradec Králové: Gallery of Modern Art; Prague: Central Bohemian Gallery, 1991.
- Kment, Zdeněk. *Pubs and Their Historical Role in Czech Society, or, Inns in Bohemia, Taverns in Wallachia and Pubs in Valašské Meziříčí* [Hospody a jejich historická úloha v české společnosti, aneb, Hostince v Čechách, šenky na Valašsku a hospody ve Valašském Meziříčí]. Valašské Meziříčí: [Z. Kment], 2011.
- Morganová, Pavlína. *Action art* [Akční umění]. Olomouc: Votobia, 1999.
- Nelson, Max. *The Barbarian's Beverage: A History of Beer in Ancient Europe*. London; New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Novotný, Vladimír, ed. *Pubs and Beer in Czech Society* [Hospody a pivo v české společnosti]. Prague: Academia, 1997.
- Pytlík, Radko. *In the Shadow of the Tap: Talks and Fantasies* [Ve stínu pípy: hovory a fantazie]. Prague: Emporius, 1996.
- Rollová, Veronika. *Prague Pub – Inspiration for Czech Visual Arts of the First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* [Pražská hospoda - inspirace pro české výtvarné umění 1. poloviny 20. století]. Bachelor Thesis. Charles University, Prague, 2009.
- Soudková, Jitka. *Beer and Pubs in the Culture of Czech society* [Pivo a hospody v kultuře české společnosti]. PhD Diss. Charles University, Prague, 2008.
- Staněk, Josef. *The Blessed Brewer: Chapters from the History of Beer* [Blažoslavený sládek: kapitoly z dějin piva]. Prague: Work, 1984.
- Novák Večerníček, Jaroslav. *History of Beer: From the Birth to the End of the Middle Ages* [Dějiny piva: od zrození až po konec středověku]. Brno: Computer Press, 2009.
- Veselý, Martin, ed. *Misted History* [Orosené dějiny]. Ústí nad Labem: Faculty of Arts, Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem, 2019.
- Vinopal, Jiří. "The Institution of the Pub in Czech Society ["Instituce hospody v české společnosti"]." *Our Society* [Naše společnost], no. 2 (2005): 31-7.
- Zíbrt, Čeněk. *From the History of Beer* [Z historie piva]. Prague: Vyšehrad, 2013.