

Czech Books - Hana Wilson: messing about on boats after two decades on the airwaves

[2010-06-27] By David Vaughan

When she lost her job after twenty years in the Czech section of the BBC, Hana Wilson was far from despondent. She simply allowed her hobby to take over her life. Hana, who left Czechoslovakia back in 1980, has spent much of the last decade on the waterways of Britain. Now she has published a book, introducing Czechs to the wonders of life on a narrowboat. Hana Wilson is David Vaughan's guest in this week's edition of Czech Books.



Hana Wilson, photo: author

Not many Czechs would think of hiring a canal boat for their summer holiday. In fact, there is only one navigable man-made waterway in the Czech Republic, the Baťa Canal in Moravia, which is gradually being restored. So Hana Wilson, armed with her helmsman's certificate, is quite exotic. To launch her book, she recently returned to her native Prague and I caught up with her for a chat about a good deal more than just her most recent career as a helmswoman.

"I was born and bred in Prague and I lived in Prague for 29 years. For half my life, I have lived in England."

And how did you end up emigrating to Britain?

"I know it sounds a bit silly, but as a very young teenager I started to listen to The Beatles, my favourite group, and I was very disappointed that I didn't understand the lyrics..."

The Beatles were incredibly popular in Czechoslovakia in the '60s and '70s.

"Yes, especially the '60s. So I started to learn English after school and when I went to college or grammar school I continued to learn. Then I went to language school, but of course the way that English was taught in Czechoslovakia was completely useless!"

You first went to Britain in the 1970s when it was no easy task, and then you ended up emigrating, which for many people who left meant not being able to come back home again.

"At that time – it was 1978 – ordinary people were allowed to go to the 'capitalist abroad' every three years – of course only after it was agreed by your employer. Then you had to ask the bank for permission to buy foreign money. And so I managed to do that in 1978. I came on a tourist visa for – I think – three weeks. And I just loved it."



London

So how did you end up going back to Britain again – this time for good?

"I had a friend and she was married to some Dutch guy. She introduced me to another friend and he was English, and we just got on quite well. I tried again to get to England, but, as I said, it was only allowed every three years, so I have to admit that what I did wasn't completely legal. I had to change job, I had to lie in my CV that I'd never been abroad, and I had to bribe someone. I'm very ashamed, but it's true! And I managed to get to England again in 1980, and then we got married – immediately."

You got married to the friend of the friend...

"Yes, it was so complicated to get married in Czechoslovakia, and I did want to make sure that I could stay in England."

It must have been tough, being in a foreign country. You had only school English. It must have been quite difficult finding a job in London.

“I just wanted to work. I didn’t want to be dependent on someone, so I started cleaning in a hotel. Then a few weeks in some clothes factory. And then I started to work at the BBC World Service, at first as a secretary.”

And you ended up working for 20 years in the BBC Czechoslovak and then Czech Section.

“Yes.”

That must have been a very interesting time. It was at the height of the Cold War. Was there a sense of the Cold War always present in your work? You were broadcasting to Czechoslovakia and obviously the communist authorities weren’t too pleased at what was coming out of London.



“I noticed later that there were several groups. There were emigrants, who had left Czechoslovakia before, during or shortly after the war; then there were the newcomers from 1968 or 1969, and then there were the other newcomers who left in the late 1970s. There was always a bit of mistrust.”

Was there some suspicion that people might be in some way attached to the StB, the secret police in Czechoslovakia?

“Yes, luckily I was contacted by the StB later, I think it was 1986, for the first time.”

Did they invite you to collaborate with them?

“Well, they didn’t invite me to collaborate. They said, ‘Well, there’s something wrong with your passport. We need to sort it out.’ So, very reluctantly, I went there and they started to ask me questions...”

This was at the Czechoslovak Embassy in London?

“No, it was here in Prague, when I came to visit my parents. They started to ask some very silly questions, because one of the ladies – although I wouldn’t call her a lady – said, ‘Oh, BBC,’ because I’d written that I worked for the BBC. I’m sure they knew anyway – and she said, ‘BBC, what kind of company is that?’ And I was very tempted to say, ‘British Bathroom Company,’ because a company with that name really exists. But I thought, I shouldn’t try to provoke them, so I said radio. She said, ‘Oh...!’”

In the end you managed to get back to Britain. They didn’t try to stop you going back to Britain or force you to collaborate.



“Not that time.”

Having been exposed to the kind of pressures that the StB put people under, do you feel sympathy for people who decided to collaborate?

“Not really. I think there’s always a way to avoid it. If there’s really hard pressure I can understand it with some people, if they are worried about their family. I wouldn’t ever accept it, if some person did it for money. No. But if it’s real pressure, psychological, or maybe even physical, I can sort of close my eyes, but.... no.”

And the events of November 1989, when the regime collapsed, must have been very exciting for you.

“I’ve got goose pimples just talking about it! It was great. Everyone worked like mad without looking at the clock. And I know that when the collapse of the Politburo was announced, I just fell on my knees and started to cry.”

With the fall of communism, you must have been tempted to come back to Czechoslovakia, but you decided to stay in Britain. Was that for family reasons?

“Not really, because by that time my marriage had broken up, but I had a lot of friends and a lot of hobbies. I started to do wine appreciation courses and I continued to do horse riding.”

You continued to work for the BBC, for the Czechoslovak and then Czech Section after the split of Czechoslovakia, until 2002, when the entire department was moved to Prague....



BBC Czech Section in Prague

“The majority of it. There were still some people there, but there was no real need for a production assistant.”

And you had an interest in canals and canal boats. This then became more than just a hobby, didn't it?

“Many years ago, during my visit to Prague, my brother-in-law asked if I would like to go wild-water canoeing with them on the Vltava. And I said, ‘Why not.’ I'd never been canoeing, so it was quite a nice experience, and I continued to go canoeing with them nearly every year for many years.”

But that's very different from canal boats!

“Yes, but I wanted to thank them, so I arranged to hire a canal boat. And we went for a fortnight on the Grand Union Canal. And when we came back, returned the boat to the boatyard and I was just sitting on the railings, and I said, ‘I'm going to sell my flat, I'm going to buy a boat, I'm going to live on the boat. Well, it never happened, but the passion, or fascination, about canals stayed with me for years to come.”

And you ended up skippering a boat....

“Well, I wouldn't call myself skipper. I was part of the crew. The skipper was the owner. Before that, of course, I had to go on a helmsman's course, so I've got my helmsman's certificate. A few years later, two hotel boats were built – especially built as a hotel, with cabins and a big kitchen...”

The idea of a hotel on a narrowboat is very interesting, because they're only two-and-a-half metres wide, aren't they?

“Two metres, ten centimetres.”



Illustrative photo: Roger W Haworth, Wikipedia

So it's a very long, narrow hotel.

“And it's 70 feet long, that's just over 22 metres...”

And you ended up doing just about everything on the boats.

“Yes, it was four crew and we did all the cooking. Everything was made fresh on the boat.”

And you've actually written a book about the canals and the canal boats in England, Wales and Scotland, which has just been published here in the Czech Republic in Czech, hasn't it?

“Yes.”

How did that come about?

“It's a long story. As a child when I started to go to school, I

was left-handed, and of course my mother, being very old-fashioned, made me be right-handed, which resulted in illegible handwriting. So, when I was on the boat, I knew I couldn't write letters to my sister. So I bought a little cassette recorder and recorded cassettes for her. And when it was finished, I'd send it to her instead of a letter. And then, because people would ask, ‘What did you do, where did you go?’ I thought, ‘If I play those cassettes back and type them, people can read it. And that was the beginning.”

And so, the book is in part a diary of your journeys through Britain.

“Yes. I added little bits of history and bits that are like a tourist guide about what's interesting, because of the interesting towns and cities we went through. So it's a mixture of everything.”

I was at the launch of the book yesterday, and someone came with a bucket of water from the Vltava and 'christened' the book with it! I was very interested that there was a pretty good crowd. A lot of people came to the book launch, the library where it was held was full, so clearly there is interest in the subject. Where does it go from here?



“I was asked if I could translate it into English. But I am afraid that there are so many books about canals in Britain that I don't think I would have a market in England. But one of my friends, the editor of the magazine, Czech Dialogue, suggested Holland, because there are great water-lovers and boat-lovers there as well. And here in Prague there are quite a lot of English-speaking tourists, so maybe.... I haven't decided yet.”