

Report on the history and contemporary status of youth work in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic

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1. Introduction

The objective of this paper is to describe the way in which work with children and young people has developed in the Czech Lands² over the last 150 years or so. This is not an exhaustively detailed description, but rather a brief summary of what has come about in this field and the impact it has had on its continuing development.

2. A brief interlude on organised “free time” in the world

One of the oldest organised associations in Europe is the Young Men’s Christian Association – YMCA, which was founded in London in 1844, and its counterpart for young women, the Young Women’s Christian Association – YWCA, founded in 1894. Since the second half of the 19th century, there have been political and trade union organisations striving for social security and better conditions of work and life for young working people. Since the beginning of the 20th century, scouting, as conceived by Robert Stephenson and R. Baden-Powell (British model) and Ernest Thompson Seton (American model), has become a force to be reckoned with. Since the 1920s, Pioneer organisations have been involved in the upbringing of the younger generation in the former USSR. In an international context, children’s and young people’s organisations have sprung up in social-democratic countries, along with religious associations, particularly those inspired by the Catholic Church. Some of these have created structures with an international reach, to coordinate their activities on a European or world scale (YMCA, Scouts).

3. Organised free time in the Czech Lands

Clearly children’s and young people’s associations in the Czech Lands have been affected by the development of society as a whole. Typical of this was what was called the “national revival”, which presented a distinctive face for the whole of the second half of the 19th century. This revival served as the context for the first adult association supporting social

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² An independent Czechoslovak Republic was declared on 28. 10. 1918 with the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and this came to an end on 1. 1. 1993 with its breakdown into two independent entities: the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. This text primarily describes the history of youth work as it has developed within today’s Czech Republic.

security of adults and young people, and subsequently also adults' free time and educational activities among children and young people. In the 1860s (1862) the first physical education organisation, Sokol, was set up here (known to begin with as Tělocvičná jednota pražská [Prague Gymnastics Club], and later as Sokol Pražský [Prague Falcon]), which played a key role in the Czech society of that time. Sokol's activities covered a very broad spectrum: floor and apparatus-based gymnastics, vaulting and combat sports, with rowing, swimming, shooting and fencing coming later. Besides regular exercise, outings and social entertainments were also organised. In 1885 the first rambling club was set up in Krásná Lípa in the northern Czech Lands, and around the same time the YMCA began to function in our country. In 1909 a Christian "competitor" for Sokol appeared, in the form of the physical education organisation Orel [Eagle], and before an independent Czech state was established (1918), the Junák club was set up (in 1912), which was the Czech version of scouts. Its main founder, A.B. Svojsík, encountered the ideas and methods of scouting in 1909, was enthused by them and originally wished to take them up as an innovation within the Sokol framework (where he was the head of the Prague regional organisation). Once an independent Czechoslovak Republic came into existence, a number of other organisations also sprang up, some of which were also part of international structures (YMCA, the scouting movement). Socialist and communist youth organisations were also bound up with international movements. In 1921, for example, the Komunistický svaz mládeže [Communist Youth Union] was established in the Czechoslovakia of that time, in conjunction with the Czechoslovak Communist Party.

With few exceptions, the above-mentioned organisations received virtually no financial support from the apparatus of state during the period of their first flowering, i.e. up to the start of World War II. They mainly received support from the public at large, so their activities were consequently funded out of gifts from sponsors, the church and their own gainful activities and membership subscriptions. Communist organisations were further subsidised by their parent political party.

With the onset of the Nazi occupation (1939), all associations were essentially banned and only a few continued to a very limited extent with illegal and sometimes also resistance activities. In their place the so-called Kuratorium [Board of Trustees] for the Education of Young People in the Czech Lands and Moravia was set up (1942), which was an organisation with a programme aimed at developing sporting activities and defence capabilities in young people. The main ideological aim of the organisation was to support so-called patriotism for the protectorate, cooperation with the German Reich and a gradual re-education in the spirit of national socialist ideology. This purpose remained unfulfilled, however, as representatives of the dissolved youth organisations, including Junák, Sokol and Orel, failed to back it.

When World War II ended (1945), the above-mentioned organisations resumed their official activities, and a number of other youth organisations also began to appear. Besides the very extensive Junák organisation (which in 1946 had had as many as 250,000 members, out of a total population of around 14 million in the whole of Czechoslovakia), Sokol, Orel and others, these were youth organisations that were backed by the Komunistická strana

Československa (KSČ) [Czechoslovak Communist Party]; chief among them was the Československý svaz mládeže (ČSM) [Czechoslovak Youth Union], the main aim of which was to exert an ideological influence on young people and promote the policies of the Communist Party. Following the Communist putsch in 1948, organisations that were not set up under the patronage of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (Junák, Sokol, Orel and others, e.g. church organisations), were once again gradually broken up, and members who resisted the ban or wished to continue their activities illegally were often sentenced to prison terms of more than ten years. In 1949 a single children's Pioneer organisation was set up on the model of the Soviet Union within the ČSM. These banned groups, which had previously united thousands of children and young people, looked for a way to function under the aegis of organisations that were still allowed – for example, within Svazarm (Svaz pro spolupráci s armádou) [Union for Cooperation with the Army]. From this time on, such organised free-time activities were mainly conducted using a monopoly model (Hofbauer, 2004), in other words their activities were more or less standardised and were linked to schools or production organisations, which guaranteed their ideological collaboration with the KSČ. The Communist regime, well aware of the potential inherent in influencing the youngest generation, supported these organisations both financially and materially.

From 1953 on, domy pionýrů a mládeže (DPM) [Houses of Pioneers and Young People] began to spring up in Czechoslovakia. Pursuant to a resolution of the Communist authorities of the late 1960s, they had to be set up in all municipalities with a population of over 5 000. They were founded by education departments of district or regional national councils as representatives of local authorities. The task of this institution was to help occupy free time for children and young people. On offer were interest-based groups and educational courses, but obviously everything had to be done in accordance with the prevailing Communist ideology.

At the end of the 1960s, at the same time as the development of DPM, greater respect began to be accorded in the existing organisations to the needs and interests of their individual members, who could, in contrast to previous practice, choose which group they wanted to join. Under the influence of social changes and as a result of attempts to democratise the regime of the time, in 1968 the traditional associations of children and young people (e.g. Junák, Sokol, Orel) were restored, or there was a fundamental transformation of them (in the Pioneers, for example), or new types of such associations came into existence. There were, for example, young technicians' centres, young naturalists' centres and young rambler's centres. The new model for children and young people was meant to be closer to them and more attractive, and to provide a more flexible fit to social demand.

This trend was forcibly interrupted by the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops led by the USSR (1968). Nevertheless, even during the period of so-called normalisation of relations which was tied to the military occupation, some of the results of previous developments managed to be maintained to a certain extent. Firstly, the former scout and camping and Pioneer sections gave rise to what were called youth rambling

sections that were registered under the name of the Československý svaz tělesné výchovy (ČSTV) [Czechoslovak Physical Education Union], where most of its leaders to a considerable extent succeeded in avoiding the political pressure for normalisation, and in orienting themselves towards activities that were close to scouting. Some other sections incorporated themselves back into Svazarm, or into a variety of protectionist organisations (e.g. the Československý svaz ochránců přírody – ČSOP [Czechoslovak Nature Protection Union]). A significant proportion of scouting (around 40%) went over to the newly-formed SSM Pioneer organisation, since, particularly in smaller places and in the countryside, this offered the only potential to continue legally working with children and young people (in contrast to larger towns, where, thanks to anonymity, it was easier to conceal one's original, now once again "politically undesirable" – e.g. scouting – identity).

Since 1968 had seen a gradual depoliticisation of ČSM activities, this umbrella organisation had to disappear with the onset of normalisation, and it was replaced by the Socialistický svaz mládeže (SSM) [Union of Socialist Youth]. This was again set up by the KSČ, and again began espousing its political creed and concentrated on youth and young people aged between 15 and 35. Within it, young people could do things their way, e.g. in artistic and dramatic groups, etc., but checks were made to ensure that the activity was in line with Communist ideology. Although a number of such groupings managed to carry on their own activities for a certain time regardless of whether official Communist ideals were sustained, for the most part these activities were banned under threat of sanctions, which extended from police harassment through the risk of being removed from studies or work, and going as far as the threat of imprisonment. At the same time it should be added, however, that a number of organisations for children and young people did function under the protection of the SSM; their activities may be considered as genuinely meaningful, because in them the "political ideology" was sidelined, and these organisations, after various transformations, are still in existence today. We may point first and foremost to the environmentally-angled Hnutí Brontosaurus [Brontosaurus Movement], the adventure-learning-oriented Lipnice Holiday School or the Czechoslovak Nature Protection Union, of which mention has already been made, and which is still fully in operation today.

The change of regime in November 1989 – ushered in by the "Velvet Revolution" – signified a complete change in relations throughout informal education and learning and in the functioning of social organisations, including those working with children and young people. With the transition to democracy, organisations that had been banned during the normalisation period were also reconstituted. This especially concerned organisations run on a scouting or woodcraft basis, or organisations originating from a Christian environment. The Union of Socialist Youth split into a number of independent entities, and its fission was accompanied by conflicts as the organisation's property was privatised. The Pioneer organisation claimed the reform heritage of 1968 and set out upon an arduous but successful road towards earning new trust from the public, which had hitherto viewed it as a "fixture" of the Communist Party. With the logic of democratic development, following 1989 hundreds of new non-governmental non-profit-making organisations (NNOs) and private

entities appeared, whose alternative programmes began to fill the space in the field of recreation for children and young people.

With decentralisation of political power, there was also a gradual transformation of the hitherto centrally-run system of the houses of pioneers and youth. A regulation issued by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Physical Education in 1992 established a standard name for these, as “recreation centres for children and young people” (SVČ), which became local government contributory organisations.³ In 2005, a new Schools Act threw up a new definition of school facilities for amateur education, comprising a) recreational centres, b) the školní klub (ŠK) [school club] and c) the školní družina (ŠD) [after-school club]. These facilities are a part of the official school system in the Czech Republic.⁴

4. The Czech Republic as a phenomenon in the sphere of informal and amateur education

It may be seen from what has been said above that activities in the field that we nowadays call informal and amateur education have always been a significant part of social life – and as such have always been fundamentally influenced by prevailing political relations. These have also extended into constituting direct influences both on who generally could perform this activity, and on how far the activity could go. The time of what is known as the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938) represented a sort of “golden age” when political interference was kept to an absolute minimum, and education and learning enjoyed (not least thanks to the quality of the teachers) considerable prestige. The Nazi occupation (1939-1945), though, forced the initial activities of organisations mainly underground, and they were replaced by pro-regime organisations attempting to put learning under wraps and poison the free time of children and young people.

After a brief return to pre-War traditions, in the 1950s in the Czechoslovakia of those times this sphere became a significant component of Communist social engineering. State policy, which provided generous funding for the recreational activities of young people, moved to deal with the adults who devoted their time to youth as well. Besides funding, there were also numerous available manuals the content of which placed emphasis on how to act “properly” on young people so that they would grow up to be good citizens who respected Soviet legality and standards and shunned the undesirable effects of reviled capitalist teaching. It was not just by political decision that there were numbers of employees who could occupy themselves professionally with amateur and informal education in the youth sphere (e.g. the leaders of Pioneer groups), but people who worked with young people in their own spare time were also supported (e.g. in the form of pay rebates).

This situation clearly contained within itself an important moral dilemma. Should a person not agree with Communist ideology (and after the Warsaw Pact troops’ occupation this was the way quite a large majority of the population of Czechoslovakia felt), but nevertheless

³ In the independent Slovak Republic a similar trend as in the Czech Republic may be discerned in the period immediately following separation of the republics.

⁴ The SVČ, ŠK and ŠD are what are known as school facilities, and as such are funded out of the national budget. Employees at these facilities must meet the standard qualification criteria for teaching staff.

wished to be involved in informal learning for children, there were basically two possibilities: he could either do this illegally, at considerable risk that sooner or later not only he and his family, but also the families of the children he was seeing in this way would get caught, or he could do it under the aegis of one of the permitted official organisations, whereby of course he would be manifesting some degree of consent to the Communist regime, and every so often he would be obliged, like it or not, to show this consent publicly, along with the children he was looking after (or in front of them) (e.g. duty to take part in the May Day parade).

The extent of such cooperation with the Communist regime was fundamentally discussed and debated during the 1990s in a number of organisations (especially those of the scouting type) and this process has still not run its full course. It remains the case that thanks to those who were active in various organisations associated with the Communist National Front (a broad umbrella coalition of social organisations), generations of their successors grew up who had been “educated”. Although following 1989 the quondam Czechoslovakia, along with the Czech Republic that succeeded it, had plenty to sort out, the sector is still suffering neglect (economic and political transformation, privatisation of property, etc.), which has led to a restriction on the financial influx into informal education and recreational activities, but nonetheless this sphere has seen dynamic development. Primarily this is down to the committed efforts of the volunteers, referred to earlier, who work with children and young people.

A period dawned which brought international exchanges, camps and meetings with organisations acting to the west of the Czech borders. Through exchanging experience and knowledge with their foreign colleagues, Czech workers found that their level of work with children and young people was at least on a comparable footing. In fact, although since the 1990s the material and financial background has tended to stagnate, with a few fluctuations, thanks to the enthusiastic and experienced volunteers it has, the Czech Republic is often held up as an example, mainly because of the high-quality and exceptional content of its programmes (variety of team and individual games, “active” work under non-traditional conditions), as well as the sphere of rambling and camping, but also because of the dense network of recreational centres, the services of which are basically available to all.

In 1998 the Česká rada dětí a mládeže (ČRD) [Czech Council for Children and Young People] was set up, which now (2014) links 99 member organisations working with children and young people (most of which are national associations of children and young people), representing around 200 000 individual members. ČRD members range from very small associations to really big ones, including ten regional youth councils. The ČRD’s mission is to support conditions for quality life and all-round development of children and young people. The ČRD puts its mission into effect by supporting out-of-school learning and activities of its members, in particular by striving to create legal, economic, social and cultural conditions that are suited to their activities. The ČRD upholds its members’ interests with domestic and foreign agencies, organisations and institutions.

At the present time (2014) there are 293 recreational centres (SVČ) throughout the Czech Republic, some 520 school clubs (ŠK) and almost 4000 after-school clubs (ŠD). These organisations are set up by the state, regions or municipalities, and to a lesser extent by private entities. They are funded from public sources depending on the number of children in regular interest-group activities, and individual participants in the learning activities (children and young people) also cover part of the financial cost of overheads. Alongside this, in the Czech Republic there are some 1500 non-governmental non-profit-making organisations (NNO) which are actively committed to recreational activities for children and young people. All the above-named types of organisation are devoted to offering children and young people (and also adults as well, quite often) an active way of spending their free time. This covers the sphere of interest-led education (provided by SVČ, ŠK, ŠD) and informal education (provided by NNOs), which takes place in the most widely varying types of group – sections, clubs, circles and so on. In these, children and young people voluntarily take part in activities in all sorts of different spheres according to their interests. These include sporting and artistic activities, nature studies, rambling, technical activities, handicrafts and other areas, which are run under the leadership of instructors, trainers and leaders for each specific type of activity. The employees in organisations like SVČ, ŠK, ŠD are professionals who are employed – recreational teachers – and who must have the relevant qualifications in accordance with current Czech Republic legislation.⁵

The people working at NNOs are both professional employees and, mainly, volunteers who work with children and young people in their free time. Their qualifications are not in any way specifically governed by laws or regulations, besides the general ones, but at a number of organisations, primarily those which function across the country, their training is subject to the internal rules of the organisation, which means that they often have to gain a pass on a variety of courses for leaders or instructors. At present these organisations come under the aegis of the Ministry for Education, Youth and Physical Education. The funding requests in this area are chiefly for regular and one-off subsidies, but they may be fielded by the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Culture or, depending on the objective of the activity, other ministries too. Organisations may also make use of grant appeals to regional administrations, municipal and local authorities, and apply to various endowment bodies and other entities. A significant proportion of the funding for such groups, however, comes from their membership subscriptions, and also, in the case of larger bodies, from European projects.

In complete accordance with trends and with Czech and European strategic initiatives, we are currently seeing the development of informal education in the context of a lifelong

⁵ To qualify as a teaching employee working with children and young people during their free time at interest-based education institutions, secondary or higher education is a requirement (depending on the type of position held). Another possibility is to acquire education within the Further Education for Pedagogical Employees (DVPP) system, which has Ministry of Education, Youth and Physical Education accreditation. One important implementer of the DVPP system for the whole of the Czech Republic is the Národní institut pro další vzdělávání (NIDV) [National Further Education Institute], which, from 2014 on, has taken on the agenda of seeing to the education of employees working with children and young people from the Národní institut dětí a mládeže [National Institute for Children and Young People].

learning philosophy. As part of systemic projects⁶ development is going into the necessary ways of supporting recognition of informal education and the quality of organisations providing informal or interest-based education. In the case of recognition of informal education, we may mention the preparation of a tool for the registration and filing of skills – the Personal Skills Portfolio, which prepares participants in education for validation and work with the results of informal education; in other words this is an important step towards becoming aware of one's own knowledge, proficiency and aims, and generally with one's readiness for personal development or usefulness in the labour market. In working with quality management systems, in the informal education sphere we are then definitely seeing a current trend which is aimed at strengthening organisations and their staff in the sense of raising the quality level of the education provided, and thus positioning educationalists in a competitive market. To this end, an on-line quality management tool (OLINA) is being piloted; this has been derived from CAF and internal audit models, and also incorporates a human resources development module.

5. Conclusion

The youth work system in the Czech Republic has grown from its roots as described in the text above. Its shape has clearly been influenced by the alternation of democratic and non-democratic regimes, which have left their particular mark upon it. The period of free development of the first organisations to work with children and young people grew out of the rich tradition of group activities of the second half of the 19th century. Two totalitarian regimes in quick succession attempted to subject education and upbringing, along with all other spheres of social, economic and political life, to a standard management and ideological mandate, and this also included informal education. Children and young people were supposed to complement a social structure of enforced compactness, watch over which was kept by the Communist Party apparatus through mutually-interconnected and monitored social organisations. During this period, however, a network of facilities took root, which is still functioning today and has its benefits in the shape of a guaranteed opportunity of recreation for children and young people. Meanwhile during this period people who subsequently helped to restore a number of public associations that began to practise the idea of informal education after 1989 were gaining their first experience of working with young people, and many of these are still functioning in these associations to this day.

⁶ We may mention two national projects that are funded by the ESF and the state budget of the Czech Republic: Klíče pro život [Keys to Life] – development of key skills in interest-based and informal education, and K2 – kvalita a konkurenceschopnost v neformálním vzdělávání [quality and competitiveness in informal education] (www.ka2.cz), which, over the period 2009-2015, in conjunction with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Physical Education, has been setting up (and is continuing to set up) the Národní institut dětí a mládeže (NIDM) [National Institute for Children and Young People] and the Národní institut pro další vzdělávání [National Further Education Institute] (NIDV, www.nidv.cz), which in 2014 took over the main part of the agenda of the NIDM.

To conclude, in an attempt to compare the parameters of the Czech system with that of Western Europe, we may state that there is a certain difference in the system of funding, and in the amount of resources invested, as well as in the system of recruitment and training of employees working with children and young people in their free time. In the Czech Republic such work is actively sought by people who want to work with young people (the overwhelming majority because they themselves had this experience themselves as children and adolescents), either as professionals or as volunteers, and who to this end undergo systematic formal or informal training in order to be able to engage in this activity. It is this factor that may be viewed as a counterbalance to the weaker areas in the system, in as much as it provides a certain guarantee of the favourable development of work with children and young people in their free time as the future unfolds.

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