

History of medicine in the Czech Republic: past and present

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This paper provides an overview of the history of medicine in the Czech Republic – from its' beginning to the present time. It deals with the institutional development, the establishing of various learned societies and scientific journals as well as the role of individual historians.

The first part of the paper describes the earliest writings related to the history of medicine in the 17th century and answers the question how this endeavour gathered more traction later when the subject was introduced as a course at the medical faculty in Prague during the last decade of the 18th century. The second part of the article deals with the foundation of the Institute for the History of Medicine in Prague and subsequent pre-World War II period.

The third part focuses mostly on the post-war period including how totalitarian regimes in the Central Europe affected the history of medicine. Also, the paper considers how additional centres for the study of medical history (such as the Museum of Medicine or the Department of medical history at Olomouc University) were established in post-war Czechoslovakia. It also pays attention to the societies which conducted research in the history of science (particularly in the field of medicine). The most notable example is the Czech (previously – Czechoslovak) Society for the History of Sciences and Technology. This part of the work also deals with the history of the "Dějiny věd a techniky" the only surviving journal dedicated to the history of science and technology in the Czech Republic.

The last part of the article describes the development of the history of medicine after the Velvet Revolution (1989) with its newly achieved freedoms as well as financial struggles stemming from broad reform of medical curricula. Apart from that, it is described "who is who" in the Czech medical history including an overview of the most important recent publications.

Keywords: history of medicine, Bohemia, Czech Republic, Charles University, learned societies

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Leaving aside occasional references to plagues, personal physicians to the king or the history of Charles University in Czech chronicles, the first text on the history of medicine published in the Kingdom of Bohemia was written in Latin. Several physicians and professors of medicine in Prague were mentioned in *Bohemia docta* written by the Jesuit scholar Bohuslav Balbín (1621–1688) [1], although this compendium of biographies had not seen the light of day until the late 18th century, when it was published

posthumously.¹ In 1787, the Viennese physician Paul Adam published a chronology of writings on the plague in Austria, including references to the Czech lands [2].

Towards the end of the 18th century, the history of medicine became, for the first time, part of the curriculum at Prague University [3, 4]. A graduate of the local medical faculty, Ignác Hadrián Matuška (1758–1819), who

¹ Balbín wrote biographies of Prague professors of medicine from the 17th century; Marcus Marci of Kronland and Jan Jakub Václav Dobřenský of Černý Most. Apart from that, he also mentioned physicians who worked outside the academia like the early 16th-century writer on plague Jan Černý.

had spent some time as a professor of anatomy and physiology in Brussels, returned from his stay abroad in 1791 to replace the famous physiologist Georg Prochaska (1749–1820). On Prochazka and many other Prague teachers, see the Biographical Lexicon of the Prague Faculty of Medicine published in 1988–1993 by Ludmila Hlaváčková and Petr Svobodný, henceforth cited as BSPLF I-II [5, p. 47–48; 6]. During the period 1795–1799 Matuška was the first professor to hold lectures called “Bibliographic History of Medicine” and this history has been part of medical teaching in Prague ever since, although interest waxed and waned during the following century. After Matuška, the history of medicine became part of the introductory course to medical studies, which was at that time called “hodegetics” (literally “pointing the way”).

The first notable teacher of this subject was the professor of anatomy Johann Georg Ilg (1771–1836) [5, p. 116]. We know little about Ilg’s teaching as there is no record of the textbook he used but since 1822 the course was taught by Jan Svatopluk Presl (1791–1849) [5, p. 54–55], who drew upon the book by Johann W. H. Conradi (1780–1861) *Grundriß der medizinischen Encyklopädie und Methodologie* (1815), which deals with, among other topics, the history of medicine [7, p. 105]. Later, Presl adopted *Hodegetik für Medizin Studierende oder Einleitung zum Studium der Medizin* (1822) again containing a historical section. Introductory lectures in “hodegetics” were compulsory until 1848/1849 when the medical studies in Prague underwent a substantial reform.

From 1842, the history of medicine was also offered as an independent non-compulsory lecture by Josef Wilhelm Löschner (1809–1888), but we do not know whether the course was actually held. In any case, this option ceased shortly after 1850 [5, p. 68–69]. The history of medicine was reintroduced again as an independent non-compulsory lecture in 1870’s by the professor of dermatovenerology Vítězslav Janovský (1847–1925), but the course was discontinued in 1883 when the university was divided into Czech and German branches [5, p. 118–119]. The subject finally became permanent after Ondřej Schrutz (1865–1932) became the first docent of the history of

medicine in 1896 and five years later received full tenure [5, p. 275–276].²

As well as the university lectures there was also a growing body of literature on various medico-historical subjects. Among the first Czech writers interested in the subject was the professor of internal medicine and special pathology Ondřej Wawruch (1773–1842), who is also known as the last physician to have treated Ludwig van Beethoven [5, p. 132]. Wawruch’s career, which started in Prague and later continued in Vienna, is fairly typical for a 19th-century scholar because Vienna university was at that time a prestigious institution located in the capital of the empire. Likewise the famous anatomist Josef Hyrtl (1810–1894) moved from Prague to Vienna in 1845 [5, p. 114–115]. Before he left, he wrote one of the first medico-historical monographs written in Bohemia, *Geschichte der Anatomie an der Carl-Ferdinands Universität in Prag* (1841). In the same year, the professor of obstetrics Antonín Jungmann published *Skizzirte Geschichte der medizinischen Anstalten an der Universität zu Prag*. Several papers on history were also published in the faculty’s medical journal *Vierteljahrschrift für die praktische Heilkunde*. It is difficult to pinpoint the oldest medico-historical texts in Czech but among the first was probably Rudolf Weitenweber (1804–1870), who made several biographical contributions to the journal *Živa* during 1853–1854. Weitenweber was interested in a broad spectrum of topics including the history of coffee consumption, Marsilio Ficino, and the history of the last plague in Bohemia (1713) [8, p. 463].

Apart from historical writings in both languages, the first half of the 19th century also brought to light the *Medizinisches Lesemuseum* (Medical Library), which was maintained by the College of Physicians (doktorské kolegium) and provided access to contemporary medical literature for the staff and the students of the faculty. The collection later became a cornerstone for the future Institute for the History of Medicine. The *Lesemuseum* was not the oldest institution of its kind in Prague, that honour goes to the

² The Czech academic position called “docent” is traditionally translated into English as “associate professor”. It was introduced in the first half of the 19th century as a so called “Privatdozent”, describing a young unpaid lecturer.

private collection of Professor Jan František Löw z Erlsfeldu, which doubled as a university library at the beginning of the 18th century. However, the *Lesemuseum* was the first public specialized library, located on the premises of the university.

During the second half of the 19th century we see a steady trickle of papers with occasional books on history published in both native languages of the kingdom. While German authors retained the traditional faculty's journal *Vierteljahrsschrift*, the Czechs founded *Časopis lékařů českých* (Journal of Czech Physicians) in 1862, which also provided space for historical topics. During this period medical history became for the first time also a topic for mainstream historians. Archivist Karel Jaromír Erben (1811–1870) started to publish editions of ancient Czech medical texts and the historian Zikmund Winter (1846–1912) wrote about the history of the Medical Faculty of Charles University and the history of the medical profession in Renaissance Bohemia [9, 10].

The 20th Century: Institute for the History of Medicine

The beginning of the 20th century heralded a new phase in the history of medicine. Germans started to build an institutional support for the discipline with the oldest foundation being Karl Sudhoff's Institute for the History of Medicine and Natural Sciences in Leipzig in 1906. Similar projects followed soon after, namely the Institute of Vienna (1914). The Czech equivalent called Ústav pro dějiny lékařství (Institute for the History of Medicine) came into being soon after the Great War in 1920, although the teaching did not start until suitable classrooms were provided in 1924. Until the mid-20th century, the history of Czech medico-historical writing mostly falls into one with the history of the institute. There were a few books or papers published by physicians interested in the past, but no institutional competition.

The first head of the institute was Ondřej Schrutz, who was succeeded by another historian-physician Josef Vinař (1876–1961) in 1930's [5, p. 352]. Vinař wrote several monographs dealing with various topics from local as well as world medical history. Despite graduating from the medical faculty, his books reflect an advanced understanding of contemporary historical methodologies. Paradoxically, Vinař's

professional prowess shortened his career. He was fired after the communist coup d'état in 1948 because his methodologies were incompatible with the new mandatory Marxist-Leninist worldview [4, p. 7].

Vinař's replacement, Miloslav Matoušek (1900–1985) was a personality full of contradictions. His interest in the socialist movement was evident long before World War II. As a left-wing intellectual, he was detained in the German concentration camp Buchenwald during the war. After 1948, his allegiance as well as the Nazi imprisonment fast-tracked Matoušek's career. His strong support for friendly relationships between Slavic nations did not hurt either. However, support of the regime came with strings attached, and after the communist putsch, Matoušek closely followed the "party line" dictated by the Stalinists. He was soon rewarded with a position in the diplomatic corps and spent several years in 1950's as the Czechoslovak ambassador to Italy, while nominally retaining the position as the head of the Prague Institute for the History of Medicine. After his return in 1956, Matoušek moved from Prague to Palacký University in Olomouc, where he created a new Institute of the History of Medicine and served as its head until 1986. His successor was Milan Slavětínský (head in 1986–1994) and after that the institute was renamed as the Institute for Social Medicine and Medical Policy, reflecting changes in its agenda.

The legacy of Matoušek is therefore controversial. On the one hand, he served the communist regime during its most oppressive period and later also wholeheartedly supported the occupation of the Czechoslovak republic by Warsaw pact armies in 1968. On the other hand, Matoušek founded the second Czech institute for the history of medicine and became the first author to bring an overview of our medical history to the international stage with translations of his works into Russian, as well as Italian. Additionally, the post-war period heralded the slow decline of medico-historical lectures at Charles University. Neither Matoušek nor his successors had much interest in regular teaching. Thus, the history of medicine as a subject was scaled back to a few individual lectures within the introductory courses for freshmen and an occasional contribution to lectures in social medicine.

After Matoušek founded the institute in Olomouc, he relinquished the administration of the Prague one and was replaced, after a brief interregnum, by another physician-historian Ludmila Sinkulová (1910–1988) [11]. In many aspects, Sinkulová's life story was similar to Matoušek because they shared a pre-war interest in a socialist state and therefore also initial sympathy for the Communist party. During the war, both Sinkulová and her husband, physician Václav Sinkule, were involved in anti-Nazi resistance. Václav was imprisoned and executed in Mauthausen concentration camp while Ludmila evaded the same fate by living under a false identity until the end of war. Many years later, she described her experience in a remarkable memoir called *Byla jsem někdo jiný (I was someone else)* [12]. Sinkulová became associate professor of the history of medicine in 1961 and at the same time took over the institute, retaining the position for ten years.

Unlike Matoušek, Sinkulová did not receive her position at the institute primarily as a fiefdom for a pro-regime advocate and she became fully involved in historical research [13]. Regrettably, her most ambitious project, the History of Czechoslovak Medicine, was only partially successful. The first volume by Marie Vojtová, which describes the period up to 1740 was published in 1970. The second part was written directly by Sinkulová [14, 15]. However, this chronologically successive part dealing with years 1740–1848 saw the light of day only in the form of a provisional textbook and was never issued properly. Subsequent volumes have not been written at all. This resulted from a political change after the 1968 Prague Spring when Sinkulová used her moral standing to publicly support a pro-reform movement within the Czechoslovak Communist Party and was subsequently forced to take early retirement after the occupation.

Her replacement, Josef Adamec, was not an historian but a Marxist-Leninist philosopher. Adamec's role was ambiguous, as a former employee of the department of Marxist-Leninist philosophy at Charles University he became a supporter of the Prague Spring (a reformist “socialism with human face” movement within the Czech communist party). After the reform movement failed, he was demoted to the less prestigious position of “interim” head of the

Institute for the History of Medicine as a form of punishment. However, he was not really interested in history and did not contribute substantially to the development of the institution.³

Society for the History of Science and Technology

The oldest learned society in Czechoslovakia called *Societas eruditorum incognitorum in terris Austriacis* (Society of Anonymous Scholars in the Austrian Lands) was founded in the Moravian city of Olomouc shortly before the mid-18th century, but it did not survive for long. In 1769, several scholars met in Prague to create *Společnost učená* (Learned Society) later rechristened *Královská česká společnost nauk* (The Royal Bohemian Society of Sciences) [16, 17]. The society was, in essence, a private entity, although it enjoyed the approval of the Hapsburg government. This Czech project proved much more viable and the society survived into the 20th century. It existed under the same name, including the epithet “Royal”, even after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 when the Kingdom of Bohemia ceased to exist.

However, after the communist putsch in 1948, it became gradually more and more difficult to cultivate civic activities outside the strict control of the Communist Party. Consequently, the “Royal” society perished at the beginning of the 1950s and the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences was created as its replacement. The new entity was firmly in the grip of the totalitarian regime.

Additionally, all other minor associations of scientific interest in Czechoslovakia including the medical ones were also forced to undergo similar reforms.⁴ In 1949, the medical societies were

³ The precariousness of his involvement is well demonstrated in a dispute concerning the authorship of BSLPF. The biographical dictionary was published in two volumes with letters A-K being published before the fall of Communism in Czechoslovakia and the second – after the Velvet Revolution in 1992. While in the former volume Josef Adamec is given as the first author, in the latter one the real authors of the book explain that he has not been involved in the research or writing at all and only attached his name to the final product during the final editing. This behavior with superiors misappropriating work of others used to be customary in Czech academia during the communist rule.

⁴ The oldest Czech medical society was Spolek lékařů českých (Society of Czech Physicians) founded in 1862.

forced to join an “umbrella” institution called Československá lékařská společnost J. E. Purkyně (Czechoslovak medical society of J. E. Purkyně) abbreviated as ČsLS JEP. On the one hand, it is important to underline that apart from providing the member associations with infrastructure, the main reason for this setup was a political desire to remove all civic activities that were not controlled by the communist state. On the other hand, the unification also had its positive effects as the ČsLS JEP provided a platform which allowed smaller communities of specialists to survive. As a matter of fact, this setup survived the fall of Communism and the umbrella society, now called Česká lékařská společnost Jana Evangelisty Purkyně (Czech medical society of Jan Evangelista Purkyně) still exists. Among other things, it provides funding for the publication of nineteen different specialist medical journals [18].

Paradoxically, this centralization of scientific societies also helped Czechoslovak historians of science create their own platform. In the mid-20th century, the history of medicine had already acquired an institutional footing outside of Prague university with a second institute for the history of medicine in Olomouc. But apart from that, a group of scholars gradually came together within the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences to create Komise pro dějiny přírodních, lékařských a technických věd ČSAV (Commission for the History of Natural, Medical, and Technical Sciences at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences) [4, p. 1–16]. A few years later, it was renamed as the Československá společnost pro dějiny věd a techniky (Czechoslovak Society for the History of Science and Technology) and became a lively platform for individuals within as well as without academia, who were interested in a whole range of subjects related to the history of sciences. For details, see the untitled introduction to the first issue of the journal *Dějiny věd a techniky* by an anonymous author [19, 20]. The Society later created sections focused on various topics like the history of pharmacology or mathematics. The section for the history of medicine came into being as well and developed its own offshoots in several major cities (Plzeň, Hradec Králové, Olomouc). Members usually met several times a year to listen to papers presented by local historians or invited speakers.

Probably the most important achievement of the Society was the foundation of a specialist journal. The original Commission first published several volumes of *Zprávy komise* (Reports of Commission), later *Zprávy společnosti* (Reports of Society), which were then renamed as *Sborník pro dějiny přírodních věd a techniky* (Collection of Papers from the History of Natural Sciences and Technology). In the Slovak part of the republic, similarly focused researchers created the journal *Z dejin vied a techniky na Slovensku* (From the History of Science and Technology in Slovakia), which was however published only in four volumes. After a while, these initial attempts merged into one scientific journal *Dějiny věd a techniky* (History of Science and Technology) with the first volume issued in 1968. The Society and its scientific journal survives today and remains the only Czech periodical dedicated to, among other things, the history of medicine.⁵

In addition to the Society, there is also the Museum of Medicine. A group of physicians linked to the so-called Physicians’ House (nowadays the seat of the Czech Medical Association of J.E. Purkyně⁶) came up with the idea to create a museum as early as 1934.⁷ Although the enthusiasts had already started to gather the first collections, it never really took off. After the war, the collections were alternately in the possession of the Ministry of Health and the National Medical Library. There was a short period of respite in 1962 during the centennial jubilee of the Czech Medical Association. The museum, barely surviving at that time, was given its first permanent exposition, but three years later it was forced to abandon the buildings, the staff were made redundant and the museum again found itself barely clinging to life. The collections have never found a place for permanent exhibition although since 1990 several options have been examined. The situation improved after 1997, when the museum became a department of the

⁵ See: http://dvt.hyperlink.cz/in_cas_e.html.

⁶ For details on society see: <http://www.cls.cz/english-info> (accessed 27. 05. 2016).

⁷ The Czech version of this history is available here: <http://www.nlk.cz/zdravotnické-muzeum/historie-muzea> (accessed 19. 03. 206).

National Medical Library.⁸ Although it still has no permanent exposition, it cooperates with several museums across the whole Czech Republic in order to regularly prepare short-term exhibitions of its collections.

The years 1970–1989, between the Prague Spring and the Velvet Revolution, are called the Normalization Period in Czech historiography. The term was related to the effort to revert the pro-democratic changes facilitated by the conservative elements within the Communist Party with the help of the occupation armies of the Warsaw pact. In official contemporary politics this process was promoted as a return to “normal” status, hence the term Normalization. As with all other areas of social and intellectual life in Czechoslovakia, the history of medicine suffered from a strict political control which offered very little leeway in terms of research freedom. During this period, however, the Institute for the History of Medicine embarked on its most ambitious project – the Biographical Lexicon of the Prague Medical Faculty. The Lexicon covers the period from the beginning of the faculty in 1348 until the abolition of Czech universities by the Nazi regime in 1939, listing all the professors and later docents (associate professors) as well as the assistant professors. It was divided into two volumes published in 1988 and 1993, later supplemented by an additional volume dealing with the German medical faculty which existed in Prague between 1882–1945 [5, 21]. Further details on the last period of the German Medical Faculty during the Nazi era as well as its demise at the end of the war were published in Alena Míšková [22].

Research leading to the collection of all the data for the Lexicon was done by a range of historians from medievalists to specialists in contemporary history. Most of them were employees of the Institute for the History of Medicine in Prague. The importance of the Lexicon cannot be overstated, as it is not just a simple list of names with biographical details attached to them, the Lexicon is also a piece of the institutional memory of the Prague Faculty of Medicine. It contributes to the definition of its corporate identity in which history during the high medieval period has substantial symbolical value. However, it is also obvious that the project

succeeded because among other things at that time the concept of a biographical lexicon was seen as ideologically innocuous for the communist censors.

The Normalization period was not entirely barren, as well as the Lexicon there were also other successful projects of a similar nature. The Institute of Czechoslovak and World History at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences harboured a small group based around Jaroslav Folta and Luboš Nový, who succeeded in publishing *Dějiny přírodních věd v datech* (Chronological History of Natural Sciences) which also covered biomedical topics [23]. Analogically, Ladislav Niklček and Karel Štein published a chronology of medical history [24]. In 1987, there was a major jubilee celebrating two centuries since the birth of Jan Evangelista Purkyně. Purkyně has been one of the most influential scientists born in Bohemia and his legacy, including a keen interest in a Czech national revival, were always highly appreciated.

After the Velvet Revolution

The fall of the Communist Bloc in the late 1980's led to a fundamental change in all academic disciplines, including the history of medicine. Historians in Czechoslovakia suddenly gained uncensored access to Western publications, they were able to travel abroad and could freely write about topics of their choice. But the post-Velvet revolution breakup of Czech academia also had less favourable effects. As the title of Francis Fukuyama's famous book “The End of History and the Last Man” suggests, historical research suddenly seemed much less relevant for the forward-looking, post-totalitarian society.

During the early 1990's Czech medical faculties restructured their curricula in order to achieve greater efficiency and catch up with the more developed countries. As pointed out earlier, the teaching of the history of medicine to students of medical faculties was regularly offered only during the first half of the 20th century. After World War II the courses became limited to only a few lessons usually within the subject of social medicine. Consequently, after the fall of Communism, it became difficult to argue in favour of a discipline that was seen by many as a hobby without any real impact on the professional development of young doctors. There was a brief surge at the beginning of 1990's, when

⁸ See: www.nlk.cz (accessed 19. 03. 2016).

the history of medicine became, for some time, a compulsory part of the freshmen year courses, first as a single lecture and later as a short, three lessons long course. However, this requirement was dropped during the 1990's and the medico-historical lecture was relegated to a preparatory, pre-university course for future students. Later non-compulsory, elective courses were offered for a small minority of students [25].

While in the pre-revolutionary period each faculty had a small department of history of medicine, the turbulent 1990's left none of these untouched. The future was murky, to say the least, as demonstrated poignantly in a 1992 study written by Ladislav Niklíček and Růžena Šimberská for *Dějiny věd a techniky*. In the final paragraphs, the authors summed up all the ills historians of medicine were facing at that time. They pointed to the communist legacy, which forestalled the introduction of modern methodologies and topics during the 1970's–1980's, they decried the unfortunate state of the medical museum and concluded that the discipline was at its lowest ebb with only three institutions⁹ involved in medico-historical research. Little did they know how wrong they were, because just two years later, the list was reduced to only one. The institute in Olomouc was transformed into the institute of social medicine and Ladislav Niklíček was forced to find refuge in the Archive of the Czech Academy of Sciences, because his department was closed. Shortly after that he died tragically in a train wreck [26].

Even the last surviving institute at the First Faculty of Medicine of Charles University underwent substantial change as it was merged with the Institute for Foreign Languages creating a hybrid that survives to this day. Although the process was not fully understood at that time, Czech historians of medicine were forced to face challenges not unlike Western historians did during the last economic crisis of 2009–2012, when shrinking budgets forced many universities to re-evaluate their research and teaching focus.

The change was further exacerbated by a fundamental political transformation as the state

⁹ These were: (1) the Institute for the History of Medicine at the Prague Faculty of General Medicine, Charles University, (2) the Institute for the History of Medicine at Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Olomouc, (3) the Cabinet for the History of Medicine and Health at the Institute for Postgraduate Education of Physicians in Prague.

called Czechoslovakia split into two new entities, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic, in 1993. Both were able to retain some institutional structures supporting medico-historical research, but there is no doubt that the division of resources did not improve the situation. It seems that the Department of the History of Medicine and Health Services in Bratislava is now the only institution in Slovakia which has the preservation of the history of medicine as its core mission.¹⁰ Apart from that, there is also the Department of History of Science and Technology, which belongs to the Institute of History, Slovak Academy of Sciences, where some researchers focus specifically on the history of medicine.¹¹

With the benefit of hindsight, it should be noted that the separation of two Central European nations, which had lived together for centuries within the former Austro-Hungarian Empire and later as Czechoslovakia, into independent states was a political success. It was remarkably peaceful unlike similar processes in Yugoslavia, The Republic of Ireland (before the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland), or recently in the Eastern Ukraine. Small communities of historians of medicine from both sides of the divide retained a positive attitude towards each other and they attempted to counteract the separation with a Czech-Slovak initiative, which soon turned into a regular bilateral conference. This became a tradition organized firstly every two years, later extended to every four years. The conference is held alternately in both countries. The last event took place at the Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem in 2015.¹²

In response to this pressure, historians of medicine tried with varying success to assert

¹⁰ The department is located at the Institute of Social Medicine and Medical Ethics at the Faculty of Medicine, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia. For details, see: <https://www.fmed.uniba.sk/pracoviska/teoreticke-ustavy/ustav-socialneho-lekarstva-a-lekarskej-etiky-lf-uk/> (accessed 17. 03. 2016).

¹¹ See: <http://www.history.sav.sk/>.

¹² The event was called 11. Mezinárodní sympózium k dějinám medicíny, farmacie a veterinární medicíny: Teorie, metodologie a prameny k dějinám medicíny, farmacie a veterinární medicíny [11th International Symposium on the History of Medicine, Pharmacology, and Veterinary Medicine: Theories, Methodologies, and Sources for the History of Medicine, Pharmacology, and Veterinary Medicine]. Ústí nad Labem 26.–27. 06. 2015.

a degree of relevance in the transforming society. Ladislav Niklček and later Hana Mášová focused on the study of pre-World War II medical and social systems in Czechoslovakia, which provided a useful comparison for newly developed health policies in the Czech Republic [27–30]. Another contemporary history theme has been tackled by Michal Šimůnek. Šimůnek is a prolific writer who with extensive international collaboration, studies the moral failures of medicine during the first half of the 20th century, including the eugenic programs run by the Nazi state [31–33].

The history of medicine also incorporated another small specialist discipline – palaeopathology. The first post-communist director of the Institute for the History of Medicine was the internationally recognised Eugen Strouhal, physician, historian and paleopathologist whose most influential monograph “Life of Ancient Egyptians” was published in several languages [34]. In the early 2000’s, he focused on the paleopathology of cancer and most recently returned to the theme of Ancient Egyptian medicine [35–38].

Strouhal was later accompanied by another palaeopathologist, surgeon Václav Smrčka, whose work on the pathology of ancient bones was awarded Hlávka’s Foundation prize in 2009 [39]. Smrčka also focused on the study of trace elements in bone tissue leading to several publications and participation on a study published in the journal Nature [40, 41]. Recently the palaeopathological part of the institute was strengthened by a young researcher, Tomáš Alušík, with an interest in the medico-historical context of the archaeology of ancient Greece [42, 43]. One important contribution of this section of the institute is an elective course of palaeopathology, which has been offered for several years in Czech as well as English.

Strouhal’s successor as director of the joined institutes of history and languages, Milada Říhová, is a classically trained philologist and medievalist. She studied the medieval beginnings of the Prague faculty of medicine and also the genre of health regimes produced in Central Europe at that time [44, 45]. Books on the medieval history of medicine are few and far between, apart from Říhová’s contribution, there is only Hana Florianová-Miškovská’s edition of the early 14th century Czech treatise on bloodletting [46]. One

of Říhová’s most important contributions to the survival of the discipline in the Czech Republic was the founding of the Ph.D. study program “the History of Medicine”, which was granted accreditation in 2004. Several of Milada Říhová’s pupils were either classical philologists or historians with a knowledge of Latin. As a result, one of the dominant themes in recent years has become early modern medical academic writing.

Throughout the second half of the 20th century this subject has been entirely neglected for several, often mutually contradictory, reasons. First, the history of academia was not in accordance with the goals of Marxist-Leninist ideology which focused primarily on class struggle as well as the leading role of the proletariat. Consequently, before 1989 this research faced ideologically motivated obstacles. The second reason lies in a post-modern methodology of science history introduced after the 1960’s. As the scope of historical inquiry broadened to escape the positivist narrative of the 19th century, medical history written by doctors about doctors, the topic of physicians themselves simply went out of fashion.

There is no doubt in my mind that after modern scholarship shifted its focus toward the patients’ point of view, gender, history of non-academic healers, concepts of illnesses as social or cultural phenomena etc. the whole discipline was immensely enhanced [47]. A particularly relevant analysis of the modern history of science in the Czech Republic is Daniel Špelda’s book and from abroad a monograph by Eckart and Jütte provides an ample list of secondary literature applicable to the whole of Central Europe [48, 49]. But as a side effect, the once coveted and later abandoned history of the medical establishment got lost in the transition. The third reason paradoxically contradicts the second: due to the surviving positivist approach, it had been taken for granted that medical treatises could be studied reliably only by physicians. But that is only partially true. While I would not dispute the necessity of a specialist interpretation in post-18th century medical writing, older texts have very little in common with modern biomedical science. Based on what we know about the perils of retrospective diagnosis, it is right to say that attempts to decipher historical records by introducing modern biomedical concepts can be outright misleading [50–54]. Finally, the

post-war period did not favour Latin as a subject at schools in Bohemia, therefore scholars with passable knowledge of the language are scarce.

The recent interest in Latin academic writing revolves around several themes – the plague and other infectious diseases, the relationship between catholic religious orders and medicine, 16th century medical consilia, court medicine in Prague during the reign of emperor Rudolph II Hapsburg, iatromathematics, and the history of early modern nutrition [55 – 61].

Perhaps the most successful in the post-communist period were two historians working in tandem – Ludmila Hlaváčková and Petr Svobodný. They were both instrumental in the compiling of the Biographical Lexicon mentioned above. They extended their collaboration to the history of medical institutions in the Czech Republic first with the Czech History of Prague Medical Faculties, later they also published a history of Prague hospitals, a history of the General Faculty Hospital in Prague (founded in 1790) and a history of the Czech Society of Oncology [62–65].

Equally important was their contribution to the major scholarly project about the history of Charles University which was published in four volumes in 1990's and again in an English translation in 2000's [66]. All the chapters about the medical faculties were co-written by Petr Svobodný and Ludmila Hlaváčková. However, the most important work of both researchers was the first modern comprehensive Czech history of medicine, with which they replaced the unfinished project started by Ludmila Sinkulová nearly half a century earlier [67]. Shortly after publication, the book was awarded several prizes. Over the years, Petr Svobodný has also contributed to several papers discussing the development of methodology and the history of medico-historical writing in the Czech Republic [26, 68, 69], all of which have been used while writing this text.

The wealth of publications mentioned so far suggests that the history of the history of medicine in the Czech Republic is far from over. One reason for this is a gradual shift of gravity from being an auxiliary discipline at the medical faculties towards being part of the mainstream historiography. This shift means that the institutional background created nearly a century ago became an anachronism. The discipline lost

its support in all the medical faculties (with the exception of the First Faculty of Medicine in Prague), while simultaneously there were several historians from other faculties ready to take up the medico-historical research. As a result, there are new centres or individual scholars involved in the subject. I have already mentioned Michal Šimůnek, who studies 20th century eugenics while working at the Institute for Contemporary History at the Czech Academy of Sciences.

The Institute for the History of Charles University (IFHCU), which also harbours the archive of the university, is another such friendly institution always ready to cooperate. Under the directorship of Petr Svobodný, the goal of the IFHCU is the history of all the sciences and humanities, but medicine is an important point on its agenda. In recent years there has been a collaboration between the institute and the medical faculty as a part of the grant program called *Prvouk 21* (History of University Education and Learning). The IFHCU also manages one of the university's journals *Acta Universitatis Carolinae – Historia Univesitatis Carolinae Pragensis*, the title is usually abbreviated to AUC-HUCP.¹³ Beside DVT, the AUC-HUCP is another Czech journal offering an opportunity to publish papers about the history of science.

In 2000, the majority of historians of science, including those interested in medicine, came together in a project called Výzkumné centrum pro dějiny věd a techniky (Research Centre for History of Science and Technology), founded in the Archive of the Czech Academy of Sciences. The VCDV was one of the first attempts to adopt new forms of financial support used in EU countries and it was financially supported directly by the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.¹⁴ The project had many flaws and was shut down a few years later, but not before it had created a remarkable opportunity for cooperation between senior and junior researchers from institutions all across the country. Seen from this point of view, it was a success.

The most prestigious historical institution in the Czech Republic is the Philosophical Faculty

¹³ It is published by Charles University press Karolinum http://www.cupress.cuni.cz/ink2_stat/index.jsp?jazyk=en.

¹⁴ Web page of the ministry: <http://www.msmt.cz/index.php?lang=2>.

of Charles University. Among its employees the medico-historical topics are studied by Daniela Tinková, who wrote several books on late 18th and early 19th century medicine [70–72]. Tinková's contribution is also remarkable for her introduction of modern historical methodology and novel themes, most notably with inspirations taken from the French historical schools. Additionally, there is also a group of classical scholars centred around Sylva Fischerová and Hynek Bartoš, who recently embarked on an ambitious project preparing the first modern Czech edition of Hippocratic writings [73]. So far, only the first volume has been published, but it is a work of exceptional quality, which reflects modern trends and brings a breath of fresh air to a discipline where we are often forced to rely upon outdated versions often published a century ago.

There are at least three other centres outside Prague which deserve to be mentioned. Firstly, there is a historical school at the university in Pardubice. Its founder and dominant personality, Milena Lenderová, has had a keen interest in gender studies including topics which resonate with a broader definition of medical history, for example the history of the policing of prostitution in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Lenderová, who often worked with Tinková, brought up a whole generation of young researchers with similar interests. Among her pupils I would mention Vladan Hanulík, who has written several papers about the history of balneology as well as the social history of medicine [74].

The second extramural centre is located at the Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem. The dominant personality there is David Tomíček, who is a pupil of Milada Říhová. While Říhová's studies focused exclusively on the High Middle Ages, Tomíček's works lean more towards the Late Middle Ages and early 16th century topics, most notably the relations between academic and popular medicine [75–77]. The most promising among Tomíček's younger collaborators is Filip Hrbek, who studies the 16th century Czech plague prints [78]. Finally, there is also a Ph.D. study specializing in the history of science at the Faculty of Philosophy, at the University of West Bohemia in Plzeň, with a few individuals

interested to various degrees in the history of medicine [79].

At the end of my overview, I would like to mention a few scholars who have not been named in previous paragraphs. Most of them have contributed to the history of individual medical disciplines. Jan Janko has been writing studies focused on the biological sciences and medicine since the 1970's. Among his works are books about the origin of experimental biology in Bohemia (1882–1918), a history of the mechanistic concept in physiology and most importantly a sweeping monograph on life sciences in the Czech Lands between 1750–1950 [80–82]. Michal Černoušek wrote about the history of psychiatry and psychology in his *Madness in the Mirror of History* [83, 84]. A similar topic, although from a different point of view, was tackled by the professor of psychiatry Eugen Vencovský [85–87]. The history of pharmacology in Bohemia has been studied primarily by Václav Rusek, Vladimír Smečka, Pavel Drábek and Zdeněk Hanzlíček [20, 80, 89].

Conclusion

Since its beginning, the Czech history of medicine has survived more than two centuries. The Institute for History of Medicine, which is the longest continuously existing institution devoted to the discipline in our country will celebrate its centennial jubilee in 2020. During all that time, the field has been repeatedly affected by methodological, institutional as well as political changes.

Particularly, the transition in the post-totalitarian period has not been easy with pressures caused by financial constraints and the requirements of rapid modernization. Despite all that, the previous generation of Czech historians of medicine succeeded in maintaining the institutional continuity. Although the subject slowly disappeared from the majority of Czech medical faculties, it gained traction in several faculties of philosophy. The foundation of the specialized Ph.D. study at the Charles University in the early 2000s also contributed to strengthening the position of the discipline within the Czech academia. Consequently, I would express a cautiously optimistic view that the discipline will survive and flourish even in the midst of swiftly shifting circumstances of the 21st century.

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