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THE GENRE OF BIOGRAPHY AS AN OBJECT OF HISTORIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH: THE CASE OF PUBLISHING EDITION “LEGACY OF THE PROGRESSIVE PERSONALITIES OF OUR PAST”¹

Abstract

The text deals with the issue of “historical biography”. It aims to reconstruct the key concepts connected with the biographical publishing series “The Legacies of the progressive personalities of our past”. The text answers the question what conceptual framework surrounded and legitimised the edition.

Key words: Melantrich, biography, conceptual history, popularization, heritage

Słowa kluczowe: melantrich, biografia, historia pojęć, popularyzacja, dziedzictwo

In contemporary historiography I distinguish two approaches to the genre of historical biography. The first is diachronic. This approach is interested mostly in creating genealogies of the genre, to contextualize it in the history of historiography and relate it to sub-disciplines like microhistory or to non-academic fields like journalism, arts, literature, etc. Typical research strategies for the diachronic approach are comparison of biographies of one person published in different epochs or creating a development scheme of the biographical genre,

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which often respond to mainstream history of historiography which consists of several “blocks” representing different paradigms: positivism, social history, structuralism, anthropological turn etc.² Analogically these authors are placing biography to these paradigms: biography in positivism, biography and the Annales school, the return of biography after the anthropological turn etc. This is sometimes connected with creating the canon of theory of biography, which consists of the selection of the most important texts in each paradigm. The typical example is the book by Georgi Plekhanov, *On the Question of the Individual's Role in History* (1898), which represents Marxism in the theory of biography in all texts of this kind of thinking about biography.

I have called the second approach “poetic”. That means the emphasis is on the question of language, the usage of different rhetorical strategies, motives and emplotments. This group of authors analyses biographies from the perspective of their textual dimension. These scholars use analytical tools from literary science, semiotics, and discourse analysis. To this group belong the authors who are mostly categorized as post-structuralist, like Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu or Roland Barthes. All of these key authors have on the edge of their work several short texts on the topic of genre biography.³ The common feature of these texts is that they begin with the poetic of biography, but then lead to the critical approach to the genre and its conservative features, which could be summed up with the terms: individual, politics and linear chronology.

I want to understand the biography neither as a pure text, but nor as a more or less institutionalized sub-discipline. I will try to understand biography as something that is being done by process of writing, publishing and critical reading of biographies. By “critical reading” I mean the work of professional critics who write their texts in daily newspapers and literary magazines. Their activity helps to co-establish the discourse on what biography is and what it should be. This focus on the communicative and processual dimension of the topic places emphasis on the cultural practices like publishing books or writing reviews.

² H. K r a g h, *The programmatic function of biography: readings of 19- and 20th-century biographies of Niels Stensen (Steno)*, in: T. Söderqvist, (Ed.), *The History and Poetics of Scientific Biography*, London–New York 2007; B. C a i n e, *Biography and history*, Basingstoke 2010; H. R e n d e r s, *Roots of Biography: From Journalism to Pulp to Scholarly Based Non-Fiction*, in: H. R e n d e r s, Binne De H a a n, *Theoretical discussions of biography: approaches from history, microhistory, and life writing*, Lewiston 2013, pp. 35–62; G.G. I g g e r s, *Historiography in the twentieth century: from scientific objectivity to the postmodern challenge*, Middletown 2005.

³ R. B a r t h e s, *Roland Barthes o Rolandu Barthesovi*, Praha 2015; *idem*, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, Praha 2005; P. B o u r d i e u, *Biografická iluze*, in: P. B o u r d i e u, *Teorie jednání*, Praha 1998; M. F o u c a u l t, *The Lives of Infamous Men*, in: *idem*, *Power, Truth, Strategy*, Sydney 2006, pp. 76–91.

This perspective leads me to choose the central source for this text which is more normal than extraordinary. Its “normality” enables the discourse which legitimated the publishing of particular historical biographies and their inclusion in the biographical publishing series to be researched. What terms played the key role in the description of the publishing series? How did the publishing house legitimise the series? What was the relationship between the publishing series and the expert discourse of historiography or literary science?

THE “LEGACIES OF THE PROGRESSIVE PERSONALITIES OF OUR PAST”
PUBLISHING SERIES

The publishing house Melantrich was established in the year 1898 as a printing house of the Czech National Social Party, which was a socialist political party with radical nationalistic attitudes.⁴ The golden age of the company lies in the interwar period when it was the biggest publishing house in the Czechoslovakian republic with a broad range of publishing activities which ranged from newspapers, books for children, scientific literature, and poetry to magazines for women. After the Nazi occupation in the year 1939 the quantities and number of published books rapidly decreased. In the post-war period the Melantrich publishing house never returned to its importance in the interwar period. After the communist party took power in the year 1948, Melantrich changed the name to Free Word (orig.: Svobodné slovo) and it became property of the state. In the fifties the publishing house produced unimportant political leaflets. The change began at the beginning of sixties, when the regime in Czechoslovakia became more liberal.⁵ This time was also a time for renewed publishing activities in many Czechoslovakian publishing houses, including Melantrich (Svobodné slovo).⁶ Publishing series for Czech and world prose, poetry and other genres were established. In this restoration process also the biographical edition *The Legacies of progressive personalities of our past* (orig. *Odkazy pokrokových osobností naší minulosti*) were established in the year 1961. The Melantrich publishing house was medium-sized with a stable publishing profile from the beginning of the sixties till the year 1989.⁷

This publishing series — in short called “Legacies” (orig.: *Odkazy*) — existed between 1961 and 1991. Biographies were published of people from the past ranging from the mediaeval period to the twentieth century. They were

⁴ M. Fejlek, *Melantrich, nepodlehne ani ohni ani meči, Melantrich*, Praha 1998, pp. 13–26.

⁵ K. McDermott, *Communist Czechoslovakia, 1945–1989*, Basingstoke 2015, pp. 91–120.

⁶ J. Halada, *Encyklopedie českých nakladatelství 1949–2006*, Praha 2007, p. 9.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 206.

mostly individuals from literary history (poets, novelists etc.), supplemented with politicians (Masaryk, Jiří z Poděbrad) and artists (Emil Filla). The edition of books published in this series was between one thousand two hundred and four thousand. During the thirty years of existence of the edition, ninety four biographies were published. This edition is also important because among the authors of these biographies were many young historians who later became a very important generation in Czech historiography like František Šmahel, Dušan Třeštík or Josef Polišenský.

I focus on the process of establishing the edition in this article, therefore the core of the text lies in the years 1961–1962, completed by several reviews and critical texts from the year 1963. Six biographies were published in the first two years of the edition — three in each year. These were Karel Havlíček Borovský, Jan Hus and František Palacký in 1961, and Karolína Světlá, Daniel Adam z Veleslavína and Božena Němcová in the following year.⁸

The print run of the biographies was mostly three thousand — Božena Němcová had the biggest print run with five thousand, followed by Karolína Světlá with three thousand five hundred. In comparison to the other biographies from the beginning of sixties we can consider these numbers as average. For example the book by Miloslav Formánek and Václav Procházka, “The heritage of thought of Karel Havlíček Borovský” published in the same year as the biography of the same person in the “Legacies” had a run of 2400 copies and the last previous biography of the same person from 1959 had a run of 3000 copies.⁹ Also, the biography of Božena Němcová had the same print run as another biography written by Zdeněk Nejedlý — the former minister of education and leading ideologist of the fifties in Czechoslovakia — published one year prior to the one in the “Legacies” publishing series.¹⁰

Karel Havlíček Borovský (1821–1856) was a journalist and writer who, after the collapse of the 1848 revolution, was deported to Brixen in northern Italy and became a symbol of the Czech national anti-Habsburg resistance and suffering in the 1850s. Jan Hus (1370–1415) — originally a Catholic priest, theologian and reformer — is a central person in Czech cultural memory since the mid-nineteenth century when František Palacký published his History of the Czech nation.¹¹ According to the Palacký, Hus is the centre of Czech his-

⁸ V. Procházka, *Karel Havlíček Borovský*, Praha 1961; J. Macek, *Jan Hus*, Praha 1961; J. Jetmarová, *František Palacký*, Praha 1961; J. Špičák, *Karolína Světlá*, Praha 1961; M. Kopecký, *Daniel Adam z Veleslavína*, Praha 1961; M. Otruba, *Božena Němcová*, Praha 1961.

⁹ E. Chalupný, *Karel Havlíček*, Havlíčkův Brod 1959; M. Formánek, V. Procházka, *Myšlenkový odkaz Karla Havlíčka Borovského*, Praha 1961.

¹⁰ Z. Nejedlý, *Božena Němcová*, Praha 1961.

¹¹ K. Činát, *Dějiny a vyprávění*, Praha 2011.

tory and symbolizes the importance and positive values of Czech nation. Hus maintained this position during the interwar period and socialism till today. František Palacký (1798–1876) was the historian who created the first narrative of Czech history and established Czech historiography. He also engaged in politics, where he held conservative opinions. He was one of the most important people in the process of Czech national emancipation.

Karolína Světlá (1830–1899) was a Czech writer, one of the very few women in the Czech literary canon. Her work is centred on the rural environment and the conflicts within families and also the role of the women in society. Daniel Adam z Veleslavína (1546–1599) was a renaissance humanist, professor at the Charles University in Prague. He influenced the publishing of The Bible of Kralice (orig: Bible kralická), which was the first translation of the Bible from the original languages into Czech. He married the daughter of the Jiří Melantrich, another humanist whose name was used for the name of the publishing house. Božena Němcová (1820–1862) was a writer, supporter of Czech national movement and she is part of the Czech literary and historical canon. Her work *Grandmother* (orig: Babička) is one of the most read books in Czech history. Her position in the Czech historical and literary canons — as with Palacký's, Hus' and Borovský's — is stable, without dependence on the political regime.

The list of names of the personalities whose biographies were published at the beginning of the “Legacies” publishing series recalls the canon of Czech national history originated in the 19th century. Especially the first three names — Borovský, Hus, and Palacký — bring to mind T. G. Masaryk's idea of the history of the Czech nation, where these persons played a key role as a representatives of national values and character.¹² From this point of view the questions formulated above seems even more important. How were those who were in the centre of the national historical and literary canon in the first Czechoslovakian republic presented at the beginning of the sixties?

To answer these questions I draw on the books themselves, the reviews of these books and also on the reviews of the whole publishing series which were published in the first three years of its existence. There is also the archival fund of the Melantrich publishing house in the National Archive, but its content is very fragmentary.¹³ All documents regarding most of the published books are missing, and many present documents are decontextualized by a missing date or broader context of their origin. There are for example internal reviews of the books, plans for particular years, official correspondence etc., but mostly from the later years. Hence I don't draw from this fund much in this article.

¹² M. Havelka, *Spor o smysl českých dějin*, Praha 1995.

¹³ Národní Archiv ČR, Fond Melantrich, karton 253 a 254.

The text is divided into three parts. The first focuses on the history of the term “biography” in the normative texts between the second half of the fifties and the first half of the sixties. It includes introductory textbooks for university students of history and literature, dictionaries from both fields and encyclopaedias in general. This section should point to the context of the understanding of the term biography in expert discourse and its changes depending on time and different contexts.

The next part will directly focus on the “Legacies of the progressive personalities of our past”. This part focuses on the discourse which surrounded and legitimised the edition. I will try to identify the key concept which created the legitimacy of the edition. In the last part of my text I will try to explain the ideological question connected with this edition. How were the Marxist and Czech national historical narrative related in this edition?

CONCEPTUAL HISTORY (BEGRIFFSGESCHICHTE)

Before we start to analyse particular biographies and the materials related to them, it is important to reconstruct the context of understanding of the term “biography” in the time of existence of the “Legacies” publishing series. This is the method of conceptual history (Begriffsgeschichte) developed by Reinhart Koselleck.¹⁴ Conceptual history is based on the analysis of meanings of the key terms of some field of study. The original framework of Koselleck’s edition was the change between the pre-modern era and the modern era and the analysis of the basic concepts may enlighten these process. This framework means that there are the most important the terms from social and political history in Germany in the original edition. It is important to say, that there is not, in the original edition of Koselleck’s work, the term ‘biography’ or another related term (e.g. Lebenslauf). This is because the focus is on the history of social processes and structures more than the perspective of the individual.

I will use this method to reconstruct the context in which the edition examined existed. For this purpose I will emphasise the synchronic aspect of the method more and I will try to create a “map” of two fields of studies: historiography and literary science, complemented by encyclopaedias and dictionaries. I have decided on these sources because literary science and historiography

¹⁴ *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. W. Conze *et al.*, Stuttgart 1972–1997; J. Rákosník, *Historie pojmu „sociální stát“ v Čechách*, in: J. Čechurová, *Mission: Historian. Homage to Professor Robert Kvaček on the occasion of his 80th birthday*, Praha 2012; J. Ira, *Dějiny politických pojmů: nové roviny, nové přístupy a nové otázky*, „Dějiny — Teorie — kritika“, 2, 2004.

were the professional backgrounds of almost all authors of the edition and reviewers too. The second reason is that the biography is sometimes described as a genre between literature and historiography, so this kind of research is an opportunity to contest this cliché. Both historiography and literary science are represented by introductory textbooks for university students, which are the traditional genre of establishing the core of the disciplines since their origins in the second half of nineteenth century.¹⁵

THE MAP OF THE TERM

There is a noticeable disproportion in the quantity of normative publications which dealt with the issue of biography between the era before the year 1968 and after this year. For the first period I have found only a few normative texts reflecting the issue of writing biographies. The first and most influential is the *Theory of Literature* (orig: *Theorie literatury*) by the Soviet literary scientist Leonid Ivan Timofejev.¹⁶ He considers a biography as part of an “artistic historical genre”, which is defined through the key role of historical facts in the construction of the plot.¹⁷ He uses the term “artistic biographical work” (orig: *umělecké životopisné dílo*) for biography.¹⁸ According to Timofejev, the role of the author is to present the historical events that were important for the life of the person and what meanings these events have had to the reader. The historical person is, according to Timofejev’s theory — important in these features, which are characteristic of his or her epoch and social environment. The psychological processes or personal development is relatively unimportant in this concept. It is important to add that the background of this book is socialist realism, where also “unhistorical” genres like the novel have to “depict the life as it really is”. Timofejev’s book is also a key referential text for many Czechoslovakian authors, who quote this book as a basic text for the field of literary science and critique.¹⁹

One of these is the next book, which deals with the issue of biography in literary science, the *Theory of Literature* (orig: *Theorie literatury*) written by

¹⁵ There were important introductory texts written by Jaroslav Goll and Ernst Bernheim for Czech historiography.

¹⁶ I. L. Timofejev, *Theorie literatury*, SNPL, Praha 1953.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 398.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ V. Štěpánek, *Theorie literatury*, Praha 1965; S. Cenek, *Základní pojmy literatury: pomocný materiál pro individuální studium jazyka českého učitelů 6.-11. postup. roč. škol všeobecně vzdělávacích*, Praha 1956.

historian of literature and university professor Vladimír Štěpánek.²⁰ He uses the term biography and its variants in a different context than Timofejev. Štěpánek also writes about biography in a chapter in which he classifies the genres. Štěpánek uses the term “biographical novel” (orig: románová biografie) in the sub-chapter about nonfiction. The biography is contextualized with reportage, travelogue and popularization literature.²¹ The role of the biographical novel is not clarified precisely, but from the context it is clear that the meaning of this genre is rather to educate the public than to be an exclusive scientific or artistic genre.

There are no normative texts in historiography where biography is mentioned. All the publications researched focus rather on collective factors in the historical process, the role of structures and economics in historical change. Also important is the topic of the place of historiography among the other scientific disciplines and especially the relationship to the exact Science. This state of affairs responds to the contemporary state of research, because most historians of science claim that the fifties were the years when science was very much used for political purposes (propaganda, education of the masses) and the place for scientific work was very limited. The sixties are defined as an era of establishing the paradigm and the “restart” of normal science. For my research, this means that for the first half of the sixties there will be more important shorter texts from professional magazines and newspapers than normative publications to understand the meanings of the term biography. In the following paragraphs I will show the more complex map of the term biography in the seventies and eighties to underscore the development of its meanings.

The description of the “biographical method” takes up the most space in both disciplines, but this term is understood differently in each discipline in the 70s and 80s in Czechoslovakia. When we focus on literary science, there are several introductory textbooks which define a “biographical method”.²² The term biographical method in these texts is used as one of analytical approaches of literary criticism among the impressionist, psychological or sociological methods. All authors define themselves against backdrop of biographical determinism, which is understood as a part of positivism. Biographical determinism means that the interpretation of the work of an author is based only on biographical information. In other words: biographical determinism understands the work as a mirror of the artist’s life. According these textbooks, the biographical approach is only useful when it helps to analyse the work of an

²⁰ V. Štěpánek, *op. cit.*

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

²² J. Svoboda, *Úvod do studia literární vědy*, Ostrava 1985; J. Hrabák, *Úvod do studia literatury*, Praha 1977; J. Pavelka, I. Pospíšil, *Úvod do literární vědy*, Brno 1979.

author. Pavelka and Pospíšil in their textbook from 1979 define two terms: biographical method, which aims to analyse a literary work, and “scientific biography”, which is a “depiction of life”. This depiction is the background for analysis of the text, but definitely not a method.

Josef Hrabák shares with other authors their division between the biographical method and scientific biography, but in his text he is more practical. He offers many examples of the selection for analysis of the text useful and useless facts from the lives of important Czech writers and poets in the sub-chapter called, “What to know about the authors”. He also mentions the need to correct the auto stylisation of artists in comparison to the “historical truth”.

In historiography the goal of the biographical method is not in the analysis of the text (work), but in gaining knowledge about society. For the biographical method, the individual life is only relevant if it is related to the inquiry on broader social processes, conflicts or developments. Miroslav Hroch, in his Introduction to the study of history, from the year 1985 writes, “If our goal is to analyse the situation in Prague University in the last twenty years of the last century, we can choose one person (a student or a teacher) from the university, collect as many sources as is possible, not only on the life of the person, but also in the broader context. There will emerge a work which formally could be called a biography, but is actually a deep probe into the life of the university in this age.”²³

Hroch underscores that the individual person is not important from the perspective of the biographical method as an active agent of the past reality, but is important as a way of researching a society. There is also a place for biography without any attribute — this is biography as a description of life in the broad context, which does not have the status of a method and which is not mentioned in this book any more.

Before the comparison between the understanding of the biographical method in literary science and historiography, it is important to underscore that there is a disproportion between these disciplines in the frequency of the usage of this term. In literary science we can find chapters or sub-chapters about the biographical method in three of six textbooks. In contrast, in historiography there is only one of four books.

The common feature of both approaches to the biographical method is that they are a synecdoche for the broader point of interest. Neither historiography nor literary science should be focused on the individual and his or her life, but on the research topic more broadly conceived. Also important is the emphasis on the term “method” in the scientific meaning. Both disciplines construct their fields of knowledge in these normative texts and these fields as defined by

²³ M. Hroch, *Úvod do studia dějepisu*, Praha 1985, p. 245.

“work” and “canon” in literary science and by “society” in historiography. The biography has sense only in its relationship to the totality of the society or literary work and a canon. So I have called the common feature of both approaches as a “scientific synecdoche” in my map.

Table 1. The map of the term “biography” in 70s and 80s in Czechoslovakia

	Scientific synecdoche	Negative distinction	Form	Information/background
Literary science	Biographical method	Scientific biography	Genre	Biographical information
Historiography	Biographical method	Description of life		
Encyclopaedias and dictionaries			Genre: professional or artistic	Depiction of life

The frequency of the presence of the term is increasing from the left to the right.

There is always a term, which is complementary to the “biographical method” and which creates a specific binary opposition. In literary science it is a “scientific biography”, which is understood as the “only necessary prerequisite for the complex sight on the literary work”.²⁴ In historiography, it is the term “microanalysis” — and biography as a description of a life is one of the examples of a microanalysis.²⁵ These terms are not conceptualized in the texts researched. They are defined only negatively or as an example of a broader approach. They are also on a lower level of methodological hierarchy, which these texts create.

But biography must not be understood only as method, but also as a genre. The term “genre” emphasises biography as a form with some conventions. This perspective is typical of encyclopaedias and dictionaries. These publications omit the methodological aspect of biography. The term “biography” is described from the etymological perspective and then there is biography defined as a description of the life of important personalities. There are also descriptions of the history of the genre. Also important is the fact that the term “genre” is missing in historiography. This absence also applies on the chapters about forms of historical works or about “popularization”. This absence confirms the emphasis in the strictly understood scientific orientation of historiography.

To conclude this part about the conceptual history of the term biography I would like to underscore that in these disciplines the term “biographical method” prevails, which is defined in opposition to other terms like “scien-

²⁴ J. Pavelka, I. Pospíšil, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

²⁵ M. Hroch, *Úvod do studia dějepisů IV. Metody historikovy práce*, Praha 1983, p. 99.

tific biography” or “biography” without any attribute. In general, the dictionary meaning is the most common understanding of the term biography as a genre.

In the next part of my text I will research a part of a publishing series “Legacies”, from its very beginning. Then I will compare the conclusions of this analysis with the positions of the term “biography” in normative texts.

THE CONCEPT OF “POPULARIZATION”

The first step to answering the question about the role of biography in this era is to get an insight into the texts which surrounded the edition. The reviews are in consensus the “Legacies of the progressive personalities of our past” is a biographical publishing series. What is more important is that there is another attribute: “popularizing”. What does it mean in the corpus of texts related to this edition?

“Extensive democratization of education creates a new task for science. This is the task of popularizing and of its discoveries and results in the foreground”.²⁶ These two sentences from the text of Ales Haman, which is called “About a new popularizing edition” are illustrative for understanding the term “popularization”. It was based on the hierarchical model, where the scientific knowledge of historians and literary scholars is at the top, which has to be spread to the masses of people. This mission of the sciences was not only present in the socialist era, but also in the nineteenth century. But especially in the fifties, there was great pressure to popularize the activities of scholars and scientists.²⁷ At the beginning of the sixties this pressure was not so strong, but texts evaluate this aim of the edition positively.

Ales Haman defined the goals of popularization very precisely in his article. According to Haman a popularizing text must be 1) “mind demanding”, 2) “have socially serious depth”, 3) “have clarity in presentation” and 4) “be not a presentation of the results but a reflection of the series of issues”.²⁸ He reviews three books from the edition from this perspective and in all three cases he finds some shortcomings in the popularization. He criticises Vaclav Procházka, because of his superficial updates and artificial language.²⁹ The biography of Jan Hus, written by eminent historian Josef Macek, is according to Haman too emotional. This emotionality covers up the real importance of Hus’s thoughts. Haman very positively evaluates the content of the work about

²⁶ A. Haman, *Nad novou popularizační edicí*, „Česká literatura“, 2, 1962, pp. 247–249.

²⁷ V. Sommer, *Angažované dějepiscectví*, Praha 2011; J. Randák, *V záři rudého kalicha*, Praha 2015.

²⁸ A. Haman, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

²⁹ V. Procházka, *Karel Havlíček Borovský: studie s ukázkami z díla*, Praha 1961.

František Palacký, but he highlights that the language of the author Milena Jetmarová is too complicated for the average reader, full of abbreviations and implications.

On the other hand Miroslav Petříček evaluates the biography of Božena Němcová from this point of view very positively.³⁰ For Petříček, the connection between the “epoch”, “life” and “work” is very important. These three components must be connected in harmony without any determinism (for example sociological or individualistic). From the same perspective, he criticises the biography of another authoress from the nineteenth century Karolina Světlá. Its author only concentrated on the development of Světlá’s thought, and, according to Petříček, the biography gives an insufficient depiction of Svetla.

Both authors formulate the concept of “popularisational biography” in their texts.³¹ They differ in their approaches: Petříček emphasises the role of integrity of all elements of biography and strictly condemns every determinism. His opinions are very close to the later introductory textbooks of literary science, which mention many methods (biographical, sociological, impressionistic, etc.) and the successful work of the literary scientist is to combine all these methods in the framework of dialectic of “Marxist literary science”. On the other hand, Haman pays attention to the communicational function of the biographies and he tries to formulate rules which enable every scholarly text to be popularised. His text focuses on the reader and his needs more than the author and his methods. He claims: “Reading the first volumes of the publishing series [...] we realize that popularisation is not only the issue of education of the readers, but of the authors too”.³² The education of authors on how to communicate correctly with their readers. Although both authors have different approaches to popularisation, they agree that this edition and popularisation in general are important and beneficial to society.

THE CONCEPT OF “HERITAGE”

Besides the strong emphasis on “popularisation”, there is a second important concept which helps to locate the edition in society. This is the concept of “heritage”, which may enlighten the relationship between the past and the present. Consequently it is a concept of time.

³⁰ M. Petříček, *Popularizovat, ale jak?*, „Literární noviny“, 1963/4.

³¹ There are also other texts on this topic, but there are just complementary to these two. J. Polák, *Tři literárněvedné studie*, „Rudé právo“, 149, 1963, p. 3; J. Polák, *Šest monografií*, „Červený květ“, 8, 1963, pp. 254–356; J. Červinka, *O užitečnosti biografie*, „Česká literatura“, 4, 1963, pp. 263–265.

³² J. Haman, *op. cit.*, pp. 247–8.

Many people think that the past is something which has finished and which has no meaning for our present. I think this is a big mistake. Mankind and man in general always want to achieve more than the previous generation. He wants to create a new reality. We seek to build a new socialist society. And actually because it is something very new, we must know our past to get a clear orientation in the present and even to be able to look a bit into the future.³³

In the whole edition the relationship between past, present and future is very strongly present. In the word “heritage” the linear conception of time is present in which “we are looking to the past to understand the present and to better plan the future”. In the quotation of Josef Macek from the transcript of a discussion from the beginning of the sixties, the concept of time connected with this edition is clearly formulated.

This pattern repeats itself in many texts related to the edition. The key terms are there: “progressive”, “democratic”, “progressive tradition” and their combinations. The text from the Religious Revue (orig: Náboženská Revue) claims: “There will emerge [...] a continuous tradition of our national and democratic ideals resulting in a fight for modern socialism, which has absorbed all the positive and living elements of existing progressive tendencies in our lands.”³⁴ This text is notable because it was published before the publishing of the first book of the edition — it contains information about the coming edition.

Many of the books were published in the years of anniversaries connected with the personalities. This applies for example to the biography of Karel Havlíček Borovský from the year 1961 and Božena Němcová from the year 1962. This detail also shows how important it was to place emphasis on the continuity of “progressive traditions”

We cannot omit that this concept of time enabled the authors of the edition (the editorial board) to incorporate into the edition many personalities from the canon of the national narrative of Czech history. From this point of view the edition creates a fascinating combination of national and Marxist concepts of history. It takes over the list of the important figures in the national story, supplemented by some leftist writers, and interprets them in the concept of the “progressive tradition” leading to socialism. It is important to say that the national narrative was also built on the linear concept of time and the future.³⁵ The understanding of time did not need to be reconceptualised, only its ideological meanings.

³³ Národní archiv, fond Melantrich, karton 254. Author is probably Josef Macek, who was a member of an editorial board. This quote is from the transcript of some debate from the first half of the sixties, but it is impossible to find more details.

³⁴ *Odkazy velkých osobností naší minulosti*, „Náboženská revue“, 1960, p. 97.

³⁵ F. Hartog, *Věřit v dějiny*, Brno 2016; M. Górny, *Między Marksem a Palackým: historiografia w komunistycznej Czechosłowacji*, Warszawa 2001.

To sum up, history is presented as heritage, as something which is still alive and has a positive value in present times. There is no place for traumatic history in this edition. The readers may receive instruction on how personalities of the past contributed to progress and become conscious of which way to the idealistic socialist future is the right one.

THE NATION AND THE CLASS

The combination of the emphasis on popularisation and of the strong concept of time, present in almost all texts related to the edition, is a very strong dispositive.³⁶ We can reconstruct the image of the publishing edition, which is supported by the state through centrally planned economics, placed in the discourse about the past by the combination of strongly consensually defined terms “popularisation” and “heritage” drawing on the tradition of thinking about the past since the mid nineteenth century and combining it with the ideals of socialism.

In addition to the conceptual level there is also the sphere of ideology, where the most important goal was to relate the national historical narrative to the Marxist one.³⁷ We can see both successful and unsuccessful examples in the first years of the edition from the point of view of critiques.

The positively accepted biographies included the publications about Božena Němcová and František Palacký. On the contrary, the biography of Karel Havlíček Borovský was criticized because of its weak argumentation. The example of the biography of the historian František Palacký is very illustrative for this issue.³⁸ Milena Jetmarová resigned to write the complex biography, but she focused only on one aspect of Palacký. Her central question was: how to solve the problem that Palacký was on the one hand the progressive personality creating the national history, but on the other hand was a representative of the bourgeois politics in the second half of the twentieth century? As a result the book is a monograph which tries to “explain” the “democratic” and “progressive” Palacký as a historian before the year 1948 and a “bourgeois” and “pro-feudal” politician after this year.³⁹

The reviewers of the book appreciate this approach, because Jetmarová was able to incorporate Palacký into the Marxist ideological system. Jetmarová is also the first author of a Marxist interpretation of Palacký. This is the difference between her book and the biography of Božena Němcová, where the examples

³⁶ L. Storchová, *Koncepty a dějiny*, Praha 2014, pp. 75–86.

³⁷ P. Kolář, M. Pullmann, *Co byla normalizace?*, p. 100–145.

³⁸ M. Jetmarová, *František Palacký, studie s ukázkami z díla*, Praha 1961.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

of former interpretations of Zdeněk Nejedlý and Julius Fučík — the two most important persons in Marxist thinking in the first half of the twentieth century in Czechoslovakia — existed.

“He (Palacký; VS), the most progressive person of the Czech bourgeois historians, stands by all his activities, on the theoretical, idea and practical level against the progress of the society after the year 1848 and his effort must be characterized as strictly reactionary.”⁴⁰ In the explanation of this change Jetmarová uses several arguments. First she describes the history of Czech historiography as a misinterpretation of Palacký’s historical work. She shows how Palacký’s successors “reinterpreted” his interpretation of Hussitism, which is the key topic in all of Palacký’s work. She especially emphasises the role of Josef Pekař — one of the most important Czech historians — and his emphasis on the religious character of the Hussite movement. From the same position, Masaryk and his approach to the Czech historical narrative are also criticized.⁴¹

The whole biography of Palacký is based on analysis of his thinking before the year 1848 and after this year. The conclusion of her book shows Jetmarová on the coherence of the Palacký’s work, which was, according to her, based on enlightenment and liberalism. The “conservative outflow of Palacký’s activities” was, according to Jetmarová, a logical and necessary process, because it was also a development of Palacký’s whole class — the bourgeoisie. In my opinion, this deterministic argument is very important in Jetmarová’s book, because it enables the work of Palacký to be divided into the “progressive” and to the “reactionary” part and to declare the continuity with the progressive one. This declaration to the progressive part of Palacký’s thinking also marks the position of contemporary Czechoslovakian society in the Czech historical narrative. The second reason why the deterministic argument is important is that it is an important part of the Marxist approach to history, which enables key figures in the national narrative to be incorporated into its socialist version.

According to Jetmarová, most of the progressive part of Palacký’s work — the history of the Czech nation — was misinterpreted by younger generations of historians and political development was strictly connected with the development of Palacký’s social class. The continuity which is created in Jetmarová’s book is placed into the sphere of art. Not historians, but artists were able to preserve the progressive tradition of Palacký’s concept of history. Jetmarová mentions in her book the paintings of Mikoláš Aleš, the music

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 107–8.

⁴¹ To the debate about the Czech historical narrative see: M. H a v e l k a, *Spor o smysl českých dějin*, Praha 1995–2006.

of Bedřich Smetana and especially the novels of Alois Jirásek who “depicted the most important period of Czech history, not only truly and nobly, but also deeply mobilising”.⁴²

CONCLUSION

I have reconstructed a specific discourse surrounding and defining the edition “The Legacies of the progressive personalities of our past” in the previous text. This is not the final answer to the question about the role of biography in the socialist era. It is rather a description of the environment in which the authors of biographies have to enter and which influenced the content and formulations of their texts.

To sum up the biographical publishing edition, “The Legacies of the progressive personalities of our past” is surrounded by a discourse in the centre of which are two terms. One of them is “popularisation” and the second is “heritage”, which is consequently the concept of time. “Biography” itself is only rarely mentioned as a special term, but it is a framework of all the books published. This complex — connected with the discursive, economic, and political power of the Melantrich (Svobodné slovo) publishing house — creates a very strong dispositive for publishing biographies. It brought attention and authority to the authors, but also some demands. Not all biographies were reviewed positively and not all of them met expectations. The discourse created the demand that biography is a genre with a very important role in society in forming its relationship to the past (and also the present and the future). It is also not possible to omit the ideological role of the edition: from this perspective the biographies were the genre, where the national historical narrative was incorporated into the Marxist one.

The next thesis of my text is, that the meaning of the term biography represented by the books published in the researched edition are not represented in the normative texts about historiography or literary science. Contrastingly, they represent in the quantitative perspective a more important part of biographical production. The gap between expert discourse and publishing practice shows from my point of view, that it is impossible to write about such terms as “socialist biography”, “Marxist biography” or “the biography of the sixties”. It is rather more accurate to describe different discourses, which enabled the publication of particular biographies or their series.

⁴² M. Jetmarová, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

Summary

The text aims to reconstruct the key concepts, which has surrounded and legitimised the edition of publishing house Melantrich “The Legacies of the progressive personalities of our past”. In the first part of the text, the author creates a “map” of the concept of biography in historiography. It serves to reconstruct the professional background of authors of the edition and also to place the edition on this “map”. Two key concepts are described in the second part of the text. First is the “popularisation”, which stresses the role of the edition in the building the socialism and education of the people. The second is the “heritage” which contains a concept of time. It creates a strong connection between past, present and future. There is also the question of ideology, which is discussed in the last part of the text. Based on the example of the biography of Frantisek Palacky, the author shows the ways the biographer coped with the issue of combining the national historical narrative and Marxist concept of history.