A CZECH HISTORIAN IN TROUBLED TIMES: J. V. POLIŠENSKÝ

Josef Polišenský, who died on 11 January 2001 at the age of eighty-five, was one of the most prominent and distinguished Czech historians of the twentieth century. In terms of international reputation, he may well stand alone, since several eminent compatriots like Pekař and Šusta wrote almost exclusively about their own domestic past and attracted correspondingly less foreign attention. Polišenský had notably strong and long-standing links with Britain and the English-speaking world. Over and above that, he had a special connection with *Past and Present*, as one of the last survivors of the team of scholars who launched the journal fifty years ago. It therefore seems appropriate to review his career in these pages. By mournful coincidence, two substantial memoirs had been prepared just at the time of Polišenský's death. One was his own reminiscences, which he began to write in 1979 but completed much later, in the form of tapes because of his gathering blindness, now published in an edition by Zdeněk Pousta. The other was oral testimony as assembled in conversations with Polišenský and interpreted by Eva and Hans Henning Hahn. For what follows I am greatly indebted to these two sources, which overlap only in part.[1]

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Polišenský was born an Austrian subject, in Prostějov (German Prossnitz), a substantial town between Olomouc and Brno, in the

[1] Josef Polišenský, *Historik v měnícím se světě* [Historian in a Changing World], ed. Zdeněk Pousta (Prague, 2001; hereafter *Historik*). I am unclear about how far Polišenský's tape-recordings have been edited, and on what basis. I am most grateful to Dr Pousta for a copy of this book. My thanks go likewise to the Hahns, who very kindly supplied me with a pre-publication typescript of their *Theatrum mundi a historici v Čechách: Setkání se vzpomínkami Josefa Polišenského* [The Theatre of the World and Historians in Bohemia: An Encounter with the Memoirs of Josef Polišenský], referred to in what follows simply as 'Hahn MS'. The memoirs began in unpropitious circumstances: Polišenský tells us drily how he was asked in 1979 by a zealous official of the secret police if he could pen 'a few pages to show how he had transmuted from a relatively progressive student into a potential agent of the CIA or

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dark and war-torn days of late autumn 1915, the son of a forester. His family's simple circumstances and Moravian environment were alike formative for him. The first implanted in him a strong commitment to social equality; while the historic margravate, which he always recalled with unfeigned fondness, continued to mean much to him, in his studies as much as in his friendships. Both influences are illustrated by an early memory of Polišenský's. As a small child out walking with his mother he encountered victims of the Prostějov riots of 1917, who were shortly, after the collapse of the Dual Monarchy, to be exalted as martyrs for the cause of Czech liberation. Subsequently he published research which showed them to have been simply starving and war-weary workers. Polišenský's priorities were always archival, prosaic, and very slightly Švejkian.

Moreover, in two further ways Moravia gave him a different perspective from that of his Bohemian contemporaries. On the one hand it lay closer to Vienna, and its Czech inhabitants were more receptive to the metropolitan culture of the old Monarchy: a number of Polišenský's relations had German as their mother tongue. On the other hand it lay closer to Hungary. That meant above all the Slovaks, for whose sensibilities vis-à-vis domineering neighbours, whether Magyar or Czech, Polišenský always evinced great respect. The openness extended, however, to Hungarian as to Austrian culture as a whole. While in no way nostalgic for the traditions of the Habsburgs or Austria-Hungary, he stayed a central European in the best sense of the term. Doubtless his easy familiarity from

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MI5' (*Historik*, 13). For all that, they provide a more intimate, direct, unbuttoned and detailed record than the Hahn MS, but are thinner on some things, including Polišenský's foreign links in general, and his British ones in particular. Other recent sources I have consulted are Jan Havránek, 'Sedmdesát pět let života a práce Josefa Polišenského' [Josef Polišenský's Life and Work over Seventy-Five Years], *Studie Muzea Kroměřížska* (1990); Jan Havránek, 'Josef Polišenský zemřel' [Josef Polišenský Has Died], *Dějiny a Současnost*, xxiii (2001), no. 2; Petr Čornej, 'Paměti Josefa Polišenského' [The Memoirs of Josef Polišenský], *Dějiny a Současnost*, xxiii (2001), no. 5; Jan Kumpera, 'Josef Polišenský — vyvolenec múzy Kleio' [Josef Polišenský — One of the Elect of Clio's Muse], *Unie Comenius*, xiii (May 2001); Miroslav Hroch's obituary in *Český Časopis Historický*, xcix (2001); and a 'précis de ma vie' by Polišenský, communicated by Marco Leeflang, in *Intermédiaire des Casanovistes*, xviii (2001). I am also very grateful for comments on the present text from Geoffrey Parker and from Nicolette (M.E.H.N.) Mout, whose obituary for the Royal Netherlands Academy, of which Polišenský was a foreign member, has now appeared in the *Levensberichten en herdenkingen 2002, Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen* (Amsterdam, 2002).

childhood with the large Jewish populations of Prostějov and other Moravian towns contributed to that breadth of vision.

Already as a boy, Polišenský evidently absorbed a surprising amount of Anglo-Saxon influence. Most of it was American, mediated even by the charity foodstuffs supplied as far afield as provincial Moravia after the war, then by films, jazz, and novelists from Poe to Frank Harris. A local Scottish airman apparently gave him his first English lessons, and encouraged him to take up the language seriously at his secondary modern school (*reálka*).[2] He continued it at the commercial academy in Prague, where he studied until he could learn enough Latin for entrance to the Charles University. There Polišenský's linguistic talents flowered, and for all his enviable mastery of the major European vernaculars, English remained his first love, not least because he fell under the spell of the great Anglicist and philologist, Vilém Mathesius, chief begetter of the Prague Linguistic Circle. It is evident from Polišenský's memoirs that both the intellectual and the personal qualities of this remarkable scholar exercised a dominant and lifelong influence on him.[3]

In his old age Polišenský remembered his historical training with less affection. He is grudging about his teachers among the inter-war academic establishment, notably their doyen, the ailing Josef Pekař, mistrusted both as a conservative and as too wedded to the unitary Czechoslovak ideology.[4] He seems somewhat reserved even about his immediate advisers, the medievalist Josef Šusta and the early modernist Karel Stloukal. They directed him towards his first historical project, the peace plans of King George Poděbrad, a ruler seeking to assert his place in the concert of Europe after the Hussite wars; and he also attended the highly reputed archive school. Yet Polišenský continued with linguistic work too, and maintained close links with younger members of the Prague Circle, especially the lexicographer Ivan Poldauf. He

[2] Hahn MS; *Historik*, 33.

[3] Hahn MS; *Historik*, 49 ff., *passim*; J. V. Polišenský, 'Vilém Mathesius, Literary Historian and "Cultural Activist" ', *Philologica Pragensia*, xxv (1982). On Mathesius: Jindřich Toman, *The Magic of a Common Language: Jakobson, Mathesius, Trubetzkoy, and the Prague Linguistic Circle* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995); see also the collection of his own writings, *Jazyk, kultura a slovesnost* [Language, Culture and Literature], ed. Josef Vachek (Prague, 1982).

[4] Hahn MS. For the background, see František Kutnar and Jaroslav Marek, *Přehledné dějiny českého a slovenského dějepisectví od počátku národní kultury až do sklonku třicátých let 20. století* [Synoptical History of Czech and Slovak Historiography from the Beginning of National Culture to the End of the 1930s] (Prague, 1997).

actually prepared a *Habilitationsschrift* in the field of linguistics by 1945, when the only manuscript of it disappeared in the first days of liberation. More important for the future was a shorter Mathesius-inspired dissertation which survives, on 'non-professional historiography as a literary (*slovesný*) type in western European literatures (*literatury*)', mainly devoted to English writers, and stressing their close relation to their readership through a striving for appropriate forms and criteria of relevance. Polišenský drew for the most part on such popularizers as Chesterton, Wells and Toynbee, the last of whom he later met and even began to translate, acknowledging his debt to Toynbee for having demonstrated, for example, the idiocy of racism.[5] In a different and more unconventional vein he also, as we shall see, encountered the work of A. L. Morton. His voracious English reading, however, already embraced members of the professional mainstream like Pollard, Temperley and — most significantly — the earlier doyen of Stuart studies, S. R. Gardiner.

Polišenský's lack of enthusiasm for his guild masters in Prague had political roots too. They were typically members of the Czech National Democrat and National Socialist parties, whereas Polišenský as a student became a fervent socialist. He felt little sentiment for T. G. Masaryk, still less for Beneš, at the helm of the foundering First Republic. By the time he had the opportunity to attend an American summer school at Geneva under the Spanish liberal exile Salvador de Madariaga in summer 1938, the writing was on the wall for the Czechoslovak state, and its western links were about to be brutally ruptured. During the wartime period Polišenský suffered intimidation from the Germans — particularly in the bloodthirsty razzia of 17 November 1939 — but he was not persecuted. He kept a low profile, mainly teaching English in girls' schools. Well enough informed about the horrors endured by others, he himself suffered rather the existential fears of all Czech intellectuals under the Protectorate, and life went on with a facade of normality. In 1940 Polišenský moved as a newly-wed with his bride Anna to Vršovická Avenue, where he would live in the same simple style for the rest of his days. Research continued too: he could publish work on Poděbrad and on the

[5] Hahn MS; *Historik*, 64 f., 108, 119, 182.

age of Rudolf II, as well as extending his acquaintance with archives, especially in Moravia.[6]

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In the last weeks of the war, Polišenský met his old mentor Šusta, now president of the puppet Czech Academy. Spurning all optimism, Šusta rightly predicted: 'Some think that Dr Beneš will return to Prague on the back of Zdeněk Nejedlý [the prime Czech Communist ideologue]. But you see, it will be just the reverse'.[7] Within a few weeks the seriously compromised Šusta was dead, whereas his pupil immediately had major tasks in rebuilding Czechoslovak historical scholarship according to a more leftist programme. Polišenský was in fact himself the first post-war doctorand of the faculty, a degree held over because of its closure by the Germans in November 1939. At the same time he prepared for his first opportunity to visit Britain, as member of a delegation of teachers from liberated Europe, to attend a congress held at Dulwich College.

This initial experience, in July 1945, was a brief one: Polišenský flew in on a British bomber, and home with a diplomatic mission headed by the fellow-travelling Czech foreign minister, Zdeněk Fierlinger. But he returned the following November, on a British Council grant, as assistant to Robert William Seton-Watson, who, after decades as the country's most prominent Slavophile academic in London, was paid by Beneš's government to take up a short-lived new chair in Czechoslovak History at Oxford. Together with his friend Poldauf (whose refined English people could hardly understand) Polišenský became a member of St Catherine's Society. The position was not ideal, less for the dreadful St Catherine's dinners of rabbit stew and battered fish which he vividly recalled half a century later, than because he could establish no closer relationship with the sick and ageing Seton-Watson. Polišenský actually reports that his professor confessed to not liking Czechs much, even Beneš, and was scathing about his pre-war amanuenses from Prague, preferring Slovaks (so long as they were Lutheran), Romanians and Croats. Polišenský's main role as aide was to find Seton-Watson some kind of audience in

[6] *Doba Jiřího z Poděbrad* [The Age of George of Poděbrad] (Prague, 1940); *Doba Rudolfa II* [The Age of Rudolph II] (Prague, 1941); Hahn MS.
[7] Hahn MS; *Historik*, 105.

an indifferent Oxford, which he claims to have achieved largely by exercising his charms on diligent undergraduates from the women's colleges.[8]

For his own work, now concentrated on the seventeenth century, Polišenský profited from an informal study group at Oxford, which included such budding young scholars as John Stoye and Menna Prestwich. The most powerful stimulus, however, was supplied when A. J. P. Taylor — who counted as Oxford history's central European expert for all periods — sent him to Christopher Hill, as the Marxist who had just celebrated the tercentenary of the English revolution. Hill showed enthusiasm for Polišenský's work and introduced him to other members of the fledgling Communist Party Historians' Group: Dobb, Rothstein, Hilton.[9] He was befriended also by Seton-Watson's successor in London, Reginald Betts. Above all, Polišenský tirelessly pursued his archival researches, and spent much time in the British Museum and Public Record Office, building on documents — once supplied by Gardiner to the great Czech/German historian of the Thirty Years War, Anton(ín) Gindely — which Polišenský had already located in Prague.[10] He was active too in lecturing on Czechoslovakia and on Bohemian history, making them relevant for British audiences.

The academic fruit of Polišenský's British stay was his *Anglie a Bílá Hora* [England and the White Mountain], completed on his return to Czechoslovakia in 1947 and published two years later. In it, James I's failure to act in support of his son-in-law and daughter, the Winter King and Queen, is set against a dense reconstruction of Anglo-Bohemian relations in the decades after 1600. Polišenský concludes (with Sir Henry Wotton) that 'the [Bohemians] did carrie a good cause ill and the [Austrians] an ill cause well'.[11] There is more about England than Bohemia:

[8] Hahn MS; *Historik*, 114 ff. For Seton-Watson, see Christopher and Hugh Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe: R. W. Seton-Watson and the Last Years of Austria-Hungary* (London, 1981), very brief post-1920; *R. W. Seton-Watson and his Relations with the Czechs and Slovaks: Documents, 1906–1951*, ed. Jan Rychlík *et al.* (Prague, 1995); R. J. W. Evans, *Britain and East-Central Europe, 1908–48: A Study in Perceptions* (Masaryk Lecture, King's College, London, 2002).

[9] Though Polišenský is not mentioned in Geoff Eley and William Hunt (eds.), *Reviving the English Revolution: Reflections and Elaborations on the Work of Christopher Hill* (London, 1988). On the Group, see Eric Hobsbawm in Maurice Cornforth (ed.), *Rebels and their Causes: Essays in Honour of A. L. Morton* (London, 1978).

[10] *Historik*, 95.

[11] *Anglie a Bílá Hora* (Prague, 1949), 194.

important material on the political implications of Stuart policy and puritan criticism of the crown. But the book contains little in the way of general reflections, beyond its conclusion that socio-historical analysis is necessary to understand international relations — and, as an agenda for future research, that the real key to the outcome in 1618–20 would be found in the Netherlands rather than England.

Anglie a Bílá Hora is silent about Polišenský's own contacts in Britain.[12] By the time it appeared, Czechoslovakia had fallen under Communist rule. No further volumes were published in the faculty series to which it belonged. Polišenský visited England again briefly in November 1948 and was the only member of the group to return to Czechoslovakia. He said that he went back because of the richness of his native archives — and because he knew something about the fate of earlier Czech emigrations.[13] Whereas Betts supplied a preface to his *History of Czechoslovakia in Outline*, issued during 1947, Betts was also the only British historian who went to Prague the following year for the sexcentennial festivities of the Carolinum. Seton-Watson concerted the rest in a public refusal to attend the commemoration.[14]

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Polišenský evinced, then and later, broad sympathy for the Communist coup of February 1948 and for the role — upon which it loosely depended — of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe during the immediate post-war period. The faculty committee installed by the new regime attested to his 'entirely progressive opinions' (*naprosto pokrokové smýšlení*). With like-minded academic friends, he soon joined the Communist party, though he explained this as a way of enabling former Social Democrats to outnumber real Communists at the university.[15] Whereas the new system, consolidated after the death of Beneš, brought changes great and small — henceforth for forty years the Polišenskýs found themselves living in the Avenue of the National

[12] *Ibid.*, 16, 208 (where Polišenský baldly notes without comment the writing of Hill and Morton on the English revolution).

[13] Hahn MS.

[14] On Betts: *ibid.*; *Historik*, 124 f., 130 f., 137, 194 f. For the Carolinum episode: R. W. Seton-Watson (ed.), *Prague Essays, Presented by a Group of British Historians to the Caroline University of Prague on the Occasion of its Six-Hundredth Anniversary* (Oxford, 1949).

[15] Hahn MS; *Historik*, 135, 139.

Security Commission (Třída S[boru] N[árodní] B[ezpečnosti]) — he asserts in his memoirs that no major shift took place at the university, and that censorship, at least in overt forms, was not imposed. He writes with appreciation and warmth towards several of the now dominant party historians, particularly Václav Husa and Jiří Hájek (though not Nejedlý). Polišenský benefited from the very intensity of his professional commitment. For over a decade he held a lecturing post in Moravia too, at Olomouc. There he taught for nothing, but felt freer, and could keep out of Prague quarrels. He became a board member of the reconstituted *Československý Časopis Historický* from its launch in 1953 and professor of General History at the Charles University in 1957.

Much the same applied in the foreign sphere. Polišenský was in charge of the Britská společnost pro Československo (British Association for Czechoslovakia), founded by Mathesius in 1920 as a progressive organization, when it expired because of mutual tensions in 1949; but he maintained links with the West, and was able to revisit the United Kingdom in the mid fifties. Friends abroad subscribed for him to the *Annales*, *History*, and other journals, while a considerable range of foreign materials continued to be available in Prague. Regular visitors from the anglophone world included Betts (until he was compromised by the Czech security services), Gordon Childe, and the Canadian Gordon Skilling. Contacts were furthered by Hájek, who became ambassador in London (and later, in the 1960s, foreign minister). Polišenský also worked intensively in the archives of the Netherlands, which yielded by 1958 a further major monograph, *Nizozemská politika a Bílá Hora* [Dutch Policy and the White Mountain], with clear acknowledgement of his debt to Braudel and the *Annales* — as well as to Buckle and Engels.[16]

Past and Present emerged from just those British circles of historiographical radicalism with which Polišenský had become closely acquainted.[17] He was a friend of a number of the members of the editorial board, which included, besides Dobb, Hill, Hilton, and Hobsbawm, the 'saturnine-looking democrat' Betts and

[16] *Historik*, 205. Much later *Nizozemská politika a Bílá Hora* appeared in English translation in Czechoslovakia as *Tragic Triangle*, with a new preface and without its long bibliographical introduction. Cf. my review in *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, cix (1994).

[17] Christopher Hill, R. H. Hilton and E. J. Hobsbawm, '*Past and Present*: Origins and Early Years', *Past and Present*, no. 100 (Aug. 1983).

Childe. The board approached Polišenský and his ambitious medievalist colleague, František Graus, to join its team of foreign 'Advisers'. Whereas the latter held aloof, Polišenský took the view that he was tarred by his western contacts already, if trouble should come; besides which he could point to the good Marxist credentials of most of the editorial board. He was the only East European who accepted.[18] According to his own testimony, it was Polišenský who 'smuggled' the Viennese Czech art historian Max Dvořák into the journal's statement of intent, even if the collective memory of the editorial board attributed this to Barraclough. In 1954 they published an article of his on the Thirty Years War, and Polišenský's name appeared on the cover of *Past and Present* until the list of 'Advisers' was silently dropped in 1963. Meanwhile his teaching of general history in Prague and Olomouc evidently depended heavily on the writings of the British left. He makes especial mention of Hill and Childe, as well as Gordon Walker and E. P. Thompson, besides Eileen Power and A. J. P. Taylor and a range of French and Spanish authors.[19]

Despite, or because of, his connections with foreign scholars, a good many of them Marxist or *marxisant*, Polišenský found the domestic climate increasingly fraught with rivalries and suspicions. His *Anglie a Bílá Hora* was hardly reviewed at all at home (though Betts in the *Slavonic and East European Review* and a certain 'Joseph Baker' in the *Slavic Review* did it justice abroad); later *Nizozemská politika* fared similarly. Contacts with the outside world were monitored by the security services, and he faced several interrogations, the most frightening of them already in 1950.[20] In his memoirs Polišenský is uncharacteristically caustic about the rising zealots whose power base was the Academy's new Institute of History: he has no time at all for the Hussite warrior Josef Macek and little enough for Graus; about their *spiritus rector*, Oldřich Říha, he remains more guarded. These

[18] Hahn MS. The list of Advisers in the first issue was C. Cahen (Strasbourg), D. Cantimori (Florence), M. Crawford (Melbourne), Abdul Haq (Karachi), G. Lefèbvre (*sic*) (Paris), M. Savelle (Washington), 'and scholars from the U.S.S.R., China and other countries'.

[19] *Historik*, 152–3.

[20] *Slavonic and East European Review*, xxix (1950–1); [*American*] *Slavic* [*and East European*] *Review*, x (1951) (this notice was really by Polišenský's teacher and friend, Otakar Odložilík, who circumspectly wrote under a pseudonym derived from the name of Josef Pekař). Hahn MS.

men openly reprimanded Polišenský for his fair-minded obituary of his old — and thoroughly 'bourgeois' — teacher Stloukal. In the late 1950s they developed an ideological attack on Polišenský as a 'neo-positivist', with dangerous British links; but he was saved from dismissal by the vote of other colleagues, particularly younger ones, and the affair ran into the sand.[21]

During the sixties things improved again. A yardstick of this is that Polišenský's involvement with the *Československý Časopis Historický*, suspended in 1959, resumed five years later. The series of his general publications on Bohemia and Europe in the Thirty Years War began with *Třicetiletá válka a český národ* (1960): two later volumes, heavily overlapping in their subject matter, were both translated into English and appeared with British and American imprints.[22] Indeed, Polišenský grew widely known internationally. He started to travel extensively, especially to West Germany. He received many visitors, becoming an oracle for all manner of enquiries about Czech history and its sources. And then there was Comenius, the greatest son of his native Moravia. The start of the official cult of Comenius in Communist Czechoslovakia can be dated to a conference held in 1957. Polišenský was closely involved with it: he even said, and only half in jest, that he was given his chair merely in order to lend weight to this enterprise.[23] Over the next three decades the figure of the 'teacher of nations', who seemed to blend patriotism so fittingly with precocious sponsorship of the international peace movement, attracted much public money and generated much Czech and Slovak scholarship good, bad and indifferent. For Polišenský it was again a topic with a strong west European and British dimension, and yielded a long string of publications in several languages, culminating in a full-scale biography which only appeared in his last years.[24]

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[21] *Československý Časopis Historický*, vi (1958), 406–8, 620; Hahn MS; *Historik*, 193 ff.

[22] *Třicetiletá válka a český národ* [The Thirty Years War and the Czech Nation] (Prague, 1960); *The Thirty Years War*, trans. Robert Evans (Berkeley, 1971); *War and Society in Europe*, with Frederick Snider (Cambridge, 1978).

[23] Hahn MS.

[24] *Komenský: muž labyrintů a naděje* [Comenius: Man of Labyrinths and Hope] (Prague, 1996). Earlier, in *Komenský v Amsterodamu* [Comenius in Amsterdam] (Prague, 1970), Polišenský and M. E. H. N. Mout had chronicled Comenius's years of residence in Holland.

Whatever the infighting, there was no doubt that Polišenský counted, in his own eyes and in those of others, as a Marxist historian of some kind. In fact, he reckoned himself a better Marxist than most of his party colleagues, having studied the classic texts in the original, mostly in English editions. He appreciated the critical and learned procedures of British Marxist historians, by contrast with those in Prague, and their openness to other approaches of a broadly progressive kind. He was influenced too by the Dutchman, Jan Romein, and in 1949 translated into Czech his article on the 'dialectic of progress', with its stress on the irregular and unprogrammed nature of human material advance. Bloch and Braudel also left their mark (though Polišenský was shocked by the latter's ignorance about sixteenth-century Bohemia). He placed himself 'somewhere between the English Marxists and the French structuralists', trying 'in the footsteps of J. M. Romein to unite the dialectic of progress with a literary-historical conception of structuralism' for which Mathesius was surely the chief model.[25] The results were very mixed. Some of Polišenský's best work grew out of his deep sympathy for the suffering masses, whether in seventeenth-century Bohemia or at Prostějov in 1917. And he was no reductionist in matters of culture and religion, applying to himself the description 'Kulturchrist', a respecter of Christian traditions.[26] Yet the history of Britain, for example, which he published in 1982, is a crude throwback to A. L. Morton's *People's History of England*, 'my precious companion and source of inspiration', redeemed only by its fascinating material on Anglo-Czech contacts in the past.[27]

Polišenský became most widely known for an interpretation of the Thirty Years War which was couched in broadly Marxist

[25] Hahn MS; *Historik*, 69, 82; *Český Časopis Historický*, lxxxix (1991), 79.

[26] For example, his first major published work, *Kniha o bolesti a smutku: Výbor z moravských kronik XVII. století* [The Book of Anguish and Grief: A Selection from Moravian Chronicles of the Seventeenth Century] (Prague, 1948); J. V. Polišenský *et al.*, 'Materiálie a dokumenty k dějinám prostějovského masakru 26. dubna 1917' [Materials and Documents for the History of the Prostějov Massacre of 26 April 1917], *Časopis Matice Moravské*, lxxi (1952); *Historik*, 299.

[27] *Dějiny Británie* [A History of Britain] (Prague, 1982), 5. The Anglo-Czech material was partly recycled from earlier works: *Anglie a my: esej o dějinách anglo-českých styků* [England and Us: An Essay on the History of Anglo-Czech Contacts] (Prague, 1947); *Britain and Czechoslovakia: A Study in Contacts* (Prague, 1966; repr. 1968). On Morton, see the appreciation by Maurice Cornforth in Hobsbawm and Cornforth (eds.), *Rebels and their Causes*.

terms of secular confrontation. Two power blocs are first hinted at in *Anglie a Bílá Hora*, where the Bohemian revolt is described as the 'first act of the great struggle between the Catholic and Protestant worlds . . . one period of the general struggle between the monarchs and the new elements of society [for] the assurance of men's rights, both economic and spiritual'.[28] By 1958 the Dutch are more clearly identified as one pole and the Spanish as the other. The characterization certainly owed something to Polišenský's own experience of the 1930s and 1940s. He says that he conceived during the war an allegorical work on the penetration of pan-Germanism and then Nazism through the ranks of the Sudeten nobility and bourgeoisie, in the guise of the penetration of Spanish or Jesuit ideology during the earlier period, with the treaty of Ulm as the 'Munich of the seventeenth century'. The Austro-Bavarian side looks like a kind of Axis on his account, just as the view of Spain was coloured for Polišenský, as for many, by close reflection on its recent Civil War (especially through his contact with Madariaga).[29] There was probably an influence too from the construction of the Iron Curtain, particularly once the Federal Republic of Germany established itself in the western camp and the *Landsmannschaften*, the irredentist Sudeten political organizations, became active there.

His British contacts also furnished Polišenský with intellectual stimulus. He recounts that he received Hilton's essay on a fourteenth-century 'general crisis of feudalism', as presented to the International Conference of Historians in Paris in 1950, and passed it on to Graus, who with Macek recycled it and shifted it towards the early modern age. Polišenský proclaims himself to have been sceptical, but he undoubtedly absorbed something from it.[30] His 1954 article in *Past and Present* identifies 'two loose "parties" ', or 'groups': roughly speaking they are Protestant versus Catholic, bourgeois versus landed, urban versus feudal,

[28] *Anglie a Bílá Hora*, 205 (from the English summary).

[29] Hahn MS; *Historik*, 94; *Anglie a Bílá Hora*, 194: 'the situation in the years 1618–20 often cries out for comparison to the period of Munich' (a passage not in the English summary); *Tragic Triangle: The Netherlands, Spain and Bohemia, 1617–21* (Prague, 1991), 7.

[30] Hahn MS; *Historik*, 167–8. Polišenský's (and Libuše Hrabová's) criticisms are in *Československý Časopis Historický*, v (1957), 142. Hilton's brief paper appeared as 'Y eut-il une crise générale de la féodalité?', in *Annales ESC*, vi (1951). This was presumably the form in which it was encountered by Polišenský, who reports a lecture by Hilton on the same subject in Prague in autumn 1950: *Nizozemská politika a Bílá Hora*, 35 n.

representative versus absolutist, aspirant versus entrenched. War was 'the logical outcome of the crisis of policy of the old feudal ruling class'. Its flashpoints lay in states 'whose economic and political interests were in a violent contradiction' through the 'law of uneven development'. Hence the significance of Bohemia, 'economically a weak country with the dangerous reputation of being a rich country'; aspects of her economic malaise explain the growing intensity of the struggle for power there. Yet Polišenský also stresses, as a good empirical historian, that her pro-Habsburg magnates were already gaining ground before 1618. He concludes, lamely, that war 'was a morbid phenomenon signalling a breakdown in the process of civilization'. The same problem informs his 1958 analysis. War is now 'the logical consequence of a political crisis, the roots of which must be sought in the inner contradictions of the economic and social structure of European society of the sixteenth and seventeenth century'.[31] Polišenský's close and fruitful examination of Dutch–Bohemian links *c.*1618–20 does not demonstrate their similarities in respect of such structures, and he does not try to claim that a few burgher republicans in Prague could bridge the gap between 'bourgeois' and 'feudal-estates' systems.

Much later Polišenský still identified the same impasse: 'a military-political conflict rooted in the past, in which two models of European civilization confronted each other: those represented by the lands in which development towards a modern capitalist society had been halted, and the lands in which this development had been allowed'.[32] An odd statement, shorn of ideological presuppositions, this makes us wonder whether Marxism, which gave Polišenský his theme, was not his worst conceptual enemy too. At that time, in the early nineties, reflecting on forty years of new scholarship about the war, he recalled with feeling how in the debates in Prague in 1949–50 his attempt to see similarities between the Bohemian revolt, on the one hand, and the Dutch and English revolutions, on the other, had been ruled out because 'revolutions' needed to be successful, and 're-feudalization', if allowed for Bohemia post-1620, implied the possibility of a 're-

[31] 'The Thirty Years' War', *Past and Present*, no. 6 (Nov. 1954); *Nizozemská politika a Bílá Hora*, 42 (cited from English summary, 231).
[32] *Tragic Triangle*, 8.

capitalization' of Communist Czechoslovakia.[33] Thus did the Soviet world-view cast its shadow, and we might see a parallel in the views of Boris Porshnev, a contemporary whom Polišenský valued sufficiently to dedicate one of his own works to his memory. For Porshnev the reactionary power bloc of the Habsburgs and Poland–Lithuania contended from 1618 with a progressive Protestant camp, backed by France — and allied to Muscovy.[34] Underneath the dialectic both scholars are surely uttering a *cri de cœur* for their seventeenth-century colleagues to pay more attention to the eastern half of the Continent. For that, and for the wealth of new sources which they deployed, we should be grateful.

* * *

The Prague Spring unfolded with Polišenský at the height of his powers and his academic sway. He approved of it, but displayed no overt commitment, sobered not least by the presence among the reformers of some of his accusers of a few years earlier. In the short term he benefited: 1969 brought a sabbatical stay at Berkeley; he published profusely and launched a monumental international source edition. Then he found himself one of the many victims of the ensuing witch-hunt. In June 1971 Polišenský was deprived of his chair as one 'unsuited (*neunosný*) from the standpoint both of the consolidatory and of the scientific-pedagogical process';[35] he did not set foot inside the faculty for another twenty years. Unlike other less fortunate colleagues, he kept his professorial title, but was paid like an *Assistent* and some of his works were removed from circulation. He began a new career as director of a small interdisciplinary Centre of Ibero-American Studies at the Carolinum, which had recently been founded in solidarity with Fidel Castro's regime but now came

[33] 'Přehled bádání od stavovského povstání k české revoluci 1618' [Survey of Research from the Estates' Rising to the Bohemian Revolution in 1618], *Český Časopis Historický*, lxxxix (1991), 79.

[34] See the earlier chapters of B. F. Porshnev, *Tridtsatiletnyaya voina i vstuplenie v nee Shvetsii i Moskovskogo Gosudarstva* [The Thirty Years War and the Entry into It of Sweden and the Muscovite State] (Moscow, 1976), the first third of an uncompleted trilogy. These sections were not included in the English translation, *Muscovy and Sweden in the Thirty Years' War, 1630–5*, ed. P. Dukes (Cambridge, 1996). There is only one passing reference to Polišenský therein, but the latter included the deceased Porshnev among the dedicatees of his *War and Society in Europe*.

[35] Hahn MS; *Historik*, 263 ff.

to reflect Polišenský's serious interest in Iberia and the whole territory of the former Iberian empires in the New World. (Not for nothing, we might now think, did the Avenue of the National Security Commission debouch not far from the Polišenskýs' flat into the Square of the Cuban Revolution.) This Středisko ibero-amerických studií, besides its distinctive professional contribution, which included a general history of Latin America, became one of those niches in the brick wall of 'normalization' during Czechoslovakia's Husák era where the sterility of official academia could be unobtrusively alleviated.[36] It also allowed Polišenský a modest foothold in publishing — even if some of his contributions had to appear in journals of the history of physical education and the like.

The seventies and eighties were, in Polišenský's view, overall much more damaging to Czech historical scholarship than the fifties. More people lost their jobs; more research was frustrated; more time-servers were bereft of new ideas. *Past and Present* issued its own protest.[37] Yet the system operated in highly arbitrary fashion, especially with regard to the world at large. Thus Polišenský's most ambitious brainchild, a seven-volume edition of documents from Bohemian archives relating to the Thirty Years War, was carried to fruition between 1971 and 1981, but his name progressively disappeared from its title pages.[38] He was in fact sidelined at home just as his reputation spread abroad through translation of his work, part of a wider phenomenon of enhanced western appreciation of Czech historians — other examples would be Jan Havránek, Miroslav Hroch, Jiří Kořalka, František Šmahel and Otto Urban — most of whom were more or less non-persons for the regime. Polišenský therefore received a wealth of foreign honours and invitations, but could do little to profit from them. Even in the later 1980s he was only able to travel to Vienna to receive the Anton-Gindely-Preis because a friend of a friend in the passport office certified that he was

[36] J. V. Polišenský *et al.*, *Dějiny Latinské Ameriky* [History of Latin America] (Prague, 1979). For other examples of such refuges, see N. Rejchrtová *et al.*, 'Nischen für die tschechische Geschichtsschreibung in der kommunistischen Ära', *Bohemia*, xxxiii (1992).

[37] R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston, 'Historians in Czechoslovakia', *Past and Present*, no. 63 (May 1974). Polišenský is not specifically mentioned (which must have pleased him); but the now officially discredited Macek is (which would have galled him).

[38] *Documenta Bohemica Bellum Tricennale illustrantia*, ed. J. Kočí *et al.*, 7 vols. (Vienna and Prague, 1971–81).

attending the funeral of a distant Austrian relation — and reminded him to at least wear black shoes on the frontier . . .[39]

Polišenský was nevertheless neither so alienated nor so temperamentally rebellious as to enter the camp of dissidence and samizdat. Caution held him back from signing Charter 77, though old friends like Hájek and Patočka were leaders of that initiative. Whereas he did play a minor part in triggering the Velvet Revolution on 17 November 1989, with an address to commemorate from personal testimony the violent persecution of students by the Germans exactly fifty years earlier, he recollected this involuntary public role in a spirit of embarrassment rather than heroism.[40] By the same token, Polišenský viewed the regime of the 1990s with the same wry suspicion as previous ones, even though he was now able to teach more freely than ever before and to publish prolifically, notably three substantial biographies. The restrictions upon him were henceforth those of old age, most seriously his ever deteriorating vision and the heart trouble which would eventually cause his death, just a year after that of his wife, and less than a month after his last public lecture.

* * *

Polišenský's written legacy is a vast œuvre, ranging over several centuries, and three continents (since he wrote on North as well as South America, especially in connection with Czech immigrants), and touching on most European countries.[41] He took a very broad view, always placing the Bohemian past in European context, and thus contributing to the well-worn debate about the 'meaning of Czech history' (*smysl českých dějin*), but simultaneously transcending the restrictive schemata into which his compatriots had routinely set the question, of the Czechs' (usually inimical) relation to the Germans or their (usually amicable) relation to other Slavs. He was an inveterate editor and compiler of prefaces — too much so for some, like his brilliant but bilious literary colleague, Václav Černý.[42] Polišenský turned his hand just as readily to university and

[39] *Historik*, 279, 283.
[40] *Ibid.*, 284–5.
[41] Bibliography, comp. J. Urbanová, in *Studie Muzea Kroměřížska* (1990); with addenda in *Ibero-Americana Pragensia* (1995).
[42] Václav Černý, *Paměti, 1945–72* [Memoirs, 1945–72] (Prague, 1992), 494. The four volumes of originally samizdat memoirs by Černý (1905–87) are, even more than Polišenský's, a window into Czech intellectual life as a whole.

school textbooks, when given the opportunity. He became the Czech historian whose work was most available abroad, at least in anglophone lands, through both translations and his own foreign-language versions: besides the 'European crises of the seventeenth century' he is associated in this way above all with the 1848 revolution in Austria.[43] Yet much of the œuvre is still locked away in Czech, including not only Polišenský's strong and precocious argument for the role of the Palatine–Bohemian affair in the genesis of the constitutional struggle of early Stuart England, but his extensive and assured writing on Enlightenment, Napoleonic and Metternichian central Europe, and on the modern Bohemian and Moravian diaspora in the Americas.[44]

Everything from Polišenský's hand deserves attention, since — if nothing else — there is always fresh and lively original material in it. The archives were indeed his great inspiration and solace. He spent much time in foreign ones, from Mexico to Moscow, from Santiago de Chile to Sárospatak, seizing every spare moment on his travels. Above all, however, he was marked by his immense and unrivalled knowledge of archives in Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia, notably those previously in private hands, in castles, monasteries and elsewhere, which he helped to bring into the public domain after 1945. Polišenský wrote his own introductions to these collections,[45] as well as discussing their relevant holdings in all his monographs. Hence, no doubt, in those early days of *Past and Present*, his particular sympathy for Max Dvořák, who had begun his career as archivist to the Lobkovices at Roudnice/Raudnitz. Yet it must be said that the sources were apt to become an end in themselves for Polišenský, invoked as offering some kind of auto-

[43] *Aristocrats and the Crowd in the Revolutionary Year 1848: A Contribution to the History of Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Austria* (Albany, 1980), trans. Frederick Snider from *Revoluce a kontrarevoluce v Rakousku 1848* (Prague, 1975).

[44] *Anglie a Bílá Hora* (though there is an English summary); (with Ella Illingová), *Jan Jeník z Bratřic* (Prague, 1989); *Napoleon a srdce Evropy* [Napoleon and the Heart of Europe] (Prague, 1971); *Opavský kongres roku 1820 a evropská politika let 1820–2* [The Troppau Congress of 1820 and European Politics in the Years 1820–2] (Ostrava, 1962); *Casanova a jeho svět* [Casanova and his World] (Prague, 1997); *Úvod do studia dějin vystěhovalectví do Ameriky* [Introduction to Study of the History of Emigration to America]: vol. 1, *Obecné prameny dějin českého vystěhovalectví do Ameriky, 1848–1914* [General Sources for the History of Czech Emigration to America, 1848–1914]; vol. 2, *Češi a Amerika* [The Czechs and America] (Prague, 1992–6).

[45] See esp. *Otázky studia obecných dějin: Prameny k obecným dějinám v českých/slovenských archivech a knihovnách* [Questions in the Study of General History: Sources for General History in Czech/Slovak Archives and Libraries], 2 vols. (Prague, 1957–63).

matic resolution of historical problems. Too often the key issue for him was whether so and so had 'been to the archives'; while he himself took too little trouble to evaluate the actual interpretative force of new evidence. Thus, to stay with *Past and Present*, his 1954 article claims that new sources have changed the received picture of the Thirty Years War, but does not properly explain how. Increasingly with the years Polišenský lacked the power — or rather the patience? — for synthesis or for the deployment of structured and measured argument. Besides that, he was no stylist or appreciator of elegance — his verdict on the one literary masterpiece in the historiography of the Thirty Years War, a 'great disappointment', is typical[46] — and he could be, at times, downright careless into the bargain. With its tendency to repetition and to a dearth of interconnectedness, the whole of Polišenský's scholarship amounts to less than the sum of its parts.

It would be churlish to make too much of such limitations. After all, as I have already suggested, Polišenský was in good measure a victim of circumstances, a Gindely (or Gardiner) born out of his time. Moreover, the published works form only part of his legacy, and they anyway now include the posthumous memoirs which reveal much about the man himself: his zest for life, never sapped by the vicissitudes he suffered; his warm collegiality and generous view of most of his colleagues (including Černý); his unaffected pride, laced with irony, in his country, her people, and her traditions; his host of pupils and extraordinary range of acquaintance; his centrality in Czech historical circles, yet constant striving for the status of an outsider. This was a brilliant raconteur, a perceptive commentator in several languages (often at once). No one who encountered them will forget his polyglot skills and shrewd judgements, whether as master of ceremonies during international conferences or in informal gatherings. This was a scholar ceaselessly immersed in his subject, who yet always had time for his myriad friends at home and abroad and engaged in many acts of professional kindness to complete strangers. Poli (as he was habitually known to many of us) would have appreciated a tribute in these pages — but he would have been quick to point out that a fuller verdict on his career must await the opening of some more archives.

Oriel College, Oxford *R. J. W. Evans*

[46] *Anglie a Bílá Hora*, 14 f., of the book by C. V. Wedgwood.