

Across the Ocean Sea

Life Jubilee of Professor Josef Opatrný



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Josef Opatrný was born on November 19, 1945 in Skryje by Rakovník in west-central Bohemia, in the sight of the romantic ruins of the medieval castle Týřov. He has forever remained a fervent local patriot and expert in regional history, proud when able to accompany to Týřov visitors from all over the world. The historical surroundings and inspiring family background (his father being a director of local school) probably formed his early intellectual interests. He studied, in the years 1963–1968, History and Bohemical Studies at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague. However, he majored in General History with the thesis *The end of the Spanish colonial domination in the Philippines*, succumbing already in this phase of his preparation to the appeal of the far-away lands that would forever complement his local embedding and mark his entire professional career. Besides, the topics he studied in the thesis were those to which he remained dedicated in the subsequent decades: the specific features of Latin American nationalism, the 19th century North American expansionism in the western hemisphere, military history.

Immediately after defending his thesis, Josef Opatrný entered the post-graduate program (1968–1971) in the newly established Center for Ibero-American studies, the first specialized Latin American studies department in Eastern bloc outside Russia, founded in the year 1967 thanks to the instigations of Josef Polišíenský¹ in the atmosphere of sudden interest in the continent and its problems, instigated by the Cuban Revolution. Of course, sparse notes on America and its history appeared in the Czech Lands since the era of the first overseas voyages,² but the attention of scholars was insignificant well until the twentieth century, due to the fact that at

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- 1 For the outline of his career, see BAĎURA, Bohumil, *Josef Polišíenský, una cumbre de la historiografía checa. In memoriam*, in: Ibero-Americana Pragensia 35, 2001, pp. 9–16; Evans, R. J. W., *A Czech Historian in Troubled Times: J. V. Polišíenský*, in: Past & Present, No. 176, 2002, pp. 257–274; bibliography of Polišíenský: <http://www.dejiny.nln.cz/Bibl/Polisensky.html>.
 - 2 Summary of these early reflections in OPATRŇÝ, Josef, *La imagen cambiante de América en la sociedad de Bohemia entre 1500 y 1848*, in: PIEPER, Renate — SCHMIDT, Peer (eds.), *Latin America and the Atlantic World/El mundo atlántico y América Latina (1500–1850): Essays in honor of Horst Pietschmann*, Köln 2005, pp. 97–113.



least until the year 1945 the study of non-European regions at European universities and academies equalled to imperial history and the specific histories of America, Africa and Asia were treated as offshoots of the histories of the colonizing nations. For the rest of the Old World, the overseas regions were of little attraction, except for the search for fellow countrymen who “left their traces” in the remotest parts of the world.³ On the other hand, and maybe precisely because of the lack of direct contact, there existed an intense interest of the general public in the exotic themes, embodied in the great popularity of the adventurous fictions of Karl May all over Central and Eastern Europe⁴ or, in a more local context, the popularity of books of Czech travellers and amateur ethnographers Alberto Vojtěch Frič and Enrique Stanko Vráz.⁵ Later, the travelogues of Jiří Hanzelka and Miroslav Zikmund gained popularity.⁶ However, America remained for the majority of the Czech public, as well as for the inhabitants of other Central European countries, a far-flung and rather unreal world.

And then, the Cuban revolution (1959), in the ironic wording of Lewis Hanke, made the public in the West and in the East to “discover Latin America again” and in the long run legitimized the study of its history and actual issues.⁷ The political relevance brought about also some financial funding and governmental support. In Moscow, Institute for Latin America was founded already in 1961 within the frame of the Academy of Sciences, in direct response to the development in Cuba and with the aim to react to “the growing interest of the Soviet people in Latin America’s rich historical background, its distinctive culture, and the present day problems of that part of the world”.⁸ This fact served as an argument for Polišínský, and the new

3 For example KYBAL, Vlastimil, *Po československých stopách v Latinské Americe* [Czechoslovak traces in Latin America], Praha 1935; KALISTA, Zdeněk, *Cesty ve znamení kříže: Dopisy a zprávy českých misionářů XVII.–XVIII. věku ze zámořských krajů* [Voyages in the sign of the cross: Letters and accounts of Czech missionaries of the 17th and 18th century from overseas lands], Praha 1941; or relevant chapters in KALISTA, Zdeněk, *Čechové, kteří tvořili dějiny světa: Z historikova skicáře o XVI. a XVII. věku* [Czechs that made history of the World: From historian’s sketch pad on the 16th and 17th century], Praha 1939; MATHESIUS, Vilém et al., *Co daly naše země Evropě a lidstvu* [What our countries contributed to Europe and the world], Praha 1940, 2 vols.

4 Among others, MAY, Karl, *Winnetou* (1893), first Czech edition already 1901.

5 Among other texts, FRIČ, Alberto Vojtěch, *Mezi indiány* [Among the Indians], Praha 1918; *Zákon pralesa* [Law of the Jungle], Praha 1921; and also ethnographic work written in travelogue style: FRIČ, Alberto Vojtěch, *Indiáni Jižní Ameriky* [Indians of South America], Praha 1943; VRÁZ, Enrique Stanko, *Napříč rovníkovou Amerikou* (Across Equinoccial America), Praha 1900.

6 Hanzelka and Zikmund travelled in 1947–1950 across Africa and South and Central America, in promotion of the automotive company Tatra. From their books about America can be mentioned *Tam za řekou je Argentina* [Over the river there is Argentina], Praha 1956; *Přes Kordillery* [Across the Cordillera Mountains], Praha 1957 etc.

7 HANKE, Lewis, *Early Development of Latin American Studies in the USA*, in: ROBINSON, David J., *Studying Latin America: Essays in Honor of Preston E. James*, Syracuse 1980, p. 44.

8 VOĽSKI, Victor, *The Study of Latin America in the U.S.S.R.*, trans. J. Gregory Oswald, in: Lat-



institution was founded within the frame of the Faculty of Arts of Charles University. When, four years later, Polišíenský was deprived of his chair at the Department of General History, in his own words “as a castaway on an ice floe, I saved myself at the Centre for Ibero-American Studies”.⁹ Important was the fact that the Centre published, since 1967, a yearly volume *Ibero-Americana Pragensia*, for several years the only Spanish scientific periodical in the Eastern bloc and one that served as a communicating media for Eastern as well as Western scholars. The center, however, did not remain independent; it was attached first to the Department of General History and then to that of Ethnography and Folklore Studies of the Faculty of Arts.

Josef Opatrný belonged already before entering the post-graduate program in the center to the circle of Polišíenský’s disciples, many of them future academics of excellence: historians Vladimír Nálevka and Bohumír Roedl, linguist and ethnologist František Vrhel, historian of art Pavel Štěpánek, historian of literature Hedvika Vydrová etc. After finishing his post-graduate program (already in 1969 he reached the title PhDr., *Philosophiae Doctor*; in 1971 CSc., *Candidatus Scientiarum*), he remained in the Centre as a researcher. During the absences of Prof. Polišíenský, he taught his classes of history of Spain and history of Latin America for the students of Romanic languages and of translatology. In 1981, after the retirement of Polišíenský from the leading position, due to health problems, he assumed the position of the Director of the Centre. In the meantime he was able to “cross the Ocean Sea” several times, even though not exactly in heels of the navigators of old. He visited Cuba in 1977, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1989 and 1990, Panama in 1980, the USA in 1988 and 1995. It was especially Cuba and its history that captivated him. Polišíenský later remembered that after his own visit of the island in 1965 he never ever had another chance to return. “But I have been sending there my assistant Josef Opatrný, who, in spite of being rather thrifty person, was buying out the local antiquarian shops and thus established a collection that is probably the most complete on European continent, especially for the first half of the 19th century, of Cuban prints.”¹⁰

Outcome of this study were two scientific monographs, *Antecedentes históricos de la formación de la nación cubana* (1986) and *US Expansionism and Cuban Annexationism in the 1850s* (1990), both dealing with what is considered to be the most important problem of Cuban history: that of the roots of (proto)national and racial sentiment at the island and the role of the United States in historical events as well as in the realm of ideologies throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. While making use of the growing interest in the issues of nationalism and nation as “imagined community”, developed in the world historiography of this period (of Czech historians, there has been a marked influence of the methodological approaches of Miroslav Hroch, applying his notions of the national revivals in Europe to the New World setting),¹¹ added to

in American Research Review 3:1, 1967, p. 77.

9 POLIŠENSKÝ, Josef, *Historik v měnícím se světě* [Historian in a Changing World], ed. Zdeněk Pousta, Praha 2001, pp. 143–144. This autobiography, however, was published only after the author’s death and without final authorization.

10 Ibidem, p. 230.

11 HROCH, Miroslav, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe*, Cambridge — New



these instigations his own original interpretations. Especially, as also the reviewers of the book noted, he was able to distinguish the inner differences and disagreements within the circles of Cuban (proto) nationalists, combining the study of long-reaching economic and socio-political trends with that of the detailed analysis of opinions and actions of concrete protagonists.¹²

Besides dedicating himself to scientific and academic work, Josef Opatrný was in the 1970s and 1980s busily publishing books for general public. On one hand, he was responding to the readers' demand, stimulated by the persistent romantic image of America in the Czech lands. But he was revising it, expanding the awareness of the factual events and opening the as yet little known chapters of American history and culture (biography of Benito Juárez and José Martí, history of the Panama Canal, North American Civil War, Indian Wars etc.).

In 1990, in response to the general political and social transformation in Czechoslovakia and the resulting changes within the University, the Center for Ibero-American Studies was re-established as an independent unit within the Faculty of Arts, with Josef Opatrný as a director. In 1992 he acquired the title Associated Professor (*docent*) and in 1995 that of Professor of World History with specialization in Latin America, giving classes such as Introduction to the Ibero-American Studies; History of Latin America in 19th and 20th century; History of Spain; History of the USA etc. He was also participating in the life of the Faculty of Arts, as a member of the Academic Senate (1989–1993, 2000–2002), for many years member of the Scientific Council, of the Editorial Council of the Faculty, of the newly established (since 2014) advisory board of the Dean, as well as the warrantor of study programs.

The Center was, at this time, offering optative courses for students of Romanic Studies or other departments and, later, a specialized M.A. course within the frame of the study program World History. Since 1998 it opened its own Ph.D. program in Ibero-American Studies and six years later a regular M.A. program. So far, more than 70 students successfully finished their M.A. and almost 30 their Ph.D. in Ibero-American studies. Other students — from the departments of History, Romanic Studies, Ethnology, Politology etc. — either frequented some of the courses as optative, or chose Opatrný as their tutor when writing theses. And even though they have never been restricted in their interests and the topics of the theses range from pre-Colombian archaeology to the most pressing problems of contemporary America, many of them had chosen to study issues from the areas of the study of nationalism, history of Cuba or of the relations of Central Europe with the Hispanic-American world. Some of the students were integrated into the research projects, such as that of the “Czechoslovakia and Latin America in the years 1945–1989”.¹³ Besides Charles University, Prof. Opatrný has been since 2010 giving classes and tutoring theses at the Metropolitan University in Prague

York 1985.

12 KAPCIA, Antoni, *Review of US Expansionism and Cuban Annecationism*, in: *Journal of Latin American Studies* 24:1, 1992, pp. 213–214.

13 Research project funded by the Ministry of Exterior of the Czech Republic in the years 2011–2013, collaborators Lucia Majlátová, Michal Zourek, Matyáš Pelant.



and the Czech Agricultural University. He has always offered scientific, but also personal guidance to the students. Many of them even after finishing their studies visit the offices in the Sweets-Sporck palace in no. 3 Hybernská Street, relate their professional and personal achievements and bring along their children, who always receive the warmest welcome in the office. The often repeated pronouncement “es su casa” (this is your house) has never been merely a polite phrase at the Center for Ibero-American Studies. Assistance and understanding, in professional as well as in personal matters, receive also the younger colleagues.

Besides M.A. and Ph.D. program, the Center became, under the leadership of Josef Opatrný, an unofficial meeting point of the Czechs interested in Latin America and of many visitors coming from Spain or the New World and, at the same time, of ambassadors of various Latin American countries. These not only sometimes present at the seminars, opening to the students yet new dimensions of the issues they are studying, but they have also been, for twenty years, warrantors of the “Premio iberoamericano”, a competition of Czech university students in essays dealing with themes of Latin American history and culture.¹⁴ But of greatest importance is the Ibero-American (at present Diploma) Seminary that since the 1960s takes place on Tuesdays at 4 p.m. — although this timing does not fit any more into the official class schedules of the Faculty of Arts. The seminary arose out of the regular informal meetings of specialists in Latin America, presided by Josef Polišenský, and until today has retained its principal features: openness to the most diverse topics and respect to those who present them, be it a distinguished visitor from abroad or a student delivering his or her very first presentation. Most of the contributors of this volume have passed through the seminary.

Between the years 1997–2005, Josef Opatrný presided of the Latin American Association of the Czech Republic, club for those interested in history, culture and contemporary problems of the continent, organizing activities to propagate the topics among the general public. The summer courses for the students of Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey, organized since the year 2000, have contributed greatly to the positive image of the Czech Republic in Mexico, as many of the alumni remember with affection the month they spend in Prague, they return afterwards, or choose their professional careers in relation to Central and Eastern Europe. In 2009 he has entered the scientific committee of the Czech National Museum.

Last but not least, Josef Opatrný has been for many decades actively participating in the international scholarly associations, first of them being the AHILA (Asociación de Historiadores Latinoamericanistas Europeos — between 1988 and 1990 he was member of its coordination committee; 1990–1993 executive committee, 1996–1999 Vice-president, in 1993 one of the organizers of the 10th Congress of AHILA in Leipzig, in 1999 member of the scientific committee of the 12th Congress of AHILA in Porto), and incessant organizer of numerous workshops, symposia and international conferences, in Prague as well as in other locations. Of greatest importance of these was the series, lasting over a decade, of conferences on the topics of the history of the Spanish Caribbean and that of four conferences on the problem of emigration from Central

¹⁴ [Http://www.premioiberoamericano.cz](http://www.premioiberoamericano.cz).



Europe to Latin America. Of both series of conferences was published an imposing number of edited volumes. Since 1993 he has been coordinator of the international workgroup within the frame of AHILA, focused on the history of Cuba.

As an invited researcher and lecturer Josef Opatrný visited universities and research centers in Spain, Cuba, France, USA, Mexico, Poland, Slovakia, Germany, Austria and Panama in addition to those in the Czech Republic. He collaborated on research projects of the Institute of History of the Spanish Research Council — CSIC (*La sociedad rural en Cuba: diversificación agrícola y formas de identidad, 1837-1937*, in 2003–2006; *Memoria del azúcar: prácticas económicas, narrativas nacionales y cultura en Cuba y Puerto Rico, 1791-1930*, in 2006–2009). Since 1986 he has been director of the yearly volume of the Center, *Ibero-Americana Pragensia*, and editor of many of the supplementary volumes (*Supplementa*). He has been, or still is, member of the Advisory Boards of various scientific journals worldwide (*Historia Latinoamericana en Europa*, *Cuban Studies*, *Revista de Indias*, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, *Tiempos de América*, *Tzintzun*, *América en Debate*, *Anales Americanistas* etc.). For these as well as other journals he wrote hundreds of thorough, sincere and instructive book reviews — an activity which most historians consider burdensome, but that nevertheless is indispensable for the successful development of the discipline.

As for his scientific interests, these had in general remained the same — namely, the various problems of the 19th century America, especially the issues of nationalism, migrations and the contacts between Central Europe and the New World. In the analytical monographs as well as in the more popular volumes manifests an interest in global processes, but also in microhistorical insights into the everyday life problems. A monograph on the personality of José Antonio Saco (2010), one of the leading Cuban publicists of the pre-independence period, has gained a favourable response among the specialized public. Josef Opatrný published more than 60 scientific articles in several languages, in collective monographs, conference volumes and scientific journals (such as *Iberoamericana*, *Revista de Indias* etc.). For the broadest public he published in Czech books and articles on the topics of Mexican-American War, American-Spanish War; he is author of short histories of Mexico, Cuba, Panama or the USA. In reward for this effort in popularization, he was awarded twice the “Award of Miroslav Ivanov” (2005, 2014) and once the “Award of Egon Ervín Kisch” (2006) for the Czech non-fiction authors.

In 2002, in recognition of services that benefit the relations between the Czech Republic and Spain Josef Opatrný was granted, by the King of Spain Juan Carlos I, the Order of Isabella the Catholic, in the grade of Commander; and in 2008 the Order of Civil Merit for the long-term promotion of Czech-Spanish relations and the study of history of Spain and Spanish America. These honors paid to Josef Opatrný are merited to the utmost. He himself, however, would undoubtedly consider as the greatest and only proper award the incessant interest of his readers and students, to whom he shows new horizons of knowledge and leads them *plus ultra* to new intellectual findings.

We extend our warmest congratulations for the life jubilee and wish many more successful achievements in scientific and pedagogical work as well as in personal life.