

Zahradníček's blog for English speaking students

Part twenty: Karel Gott, or Karel Kryl?

Many Czechs do not speak English and they are not used to foreigners. Especially for old generation local singers, singing in Czech language, are very popular.

Probably the most popular Czech singer at all had been Karel Gott (born 1939, died 2019). As a young boy, he sang in experimental theatre, the songs have been rock'n roll style and he started to be very popular. Later he changed his style a little bit, and he became a face of mainstream pop-music, that brought no new ideas, but it was very popular. Famous composers composed the songs for him; they were mostly very romantic and very popular. Some of these songs occurred also in cinema and TV movies, including animated movies for children – the most famous of them was *Maya The Honey Bee*, co-produced by Japan, Canada, West Germany and Austria. Many of them have been translated to German and so Karel Gott (himself with some German roots) became very popular in Austria and West Germany. We should not forget, that Germany in seventies and eighties was divided by a fence to “*Bundesrepublik Deutschland*” or West Germany, and communist “*Deutsche Demokratische Republik*” or East Germany; and also Berlin was divided into its Western and Eastern part. Of course, Karel Gott was very popular also in East Germany, Poland, Hungary and other countries of the “Eastern block”.

During his life Karel Gott released over 100 albums and sold an estimated 50–100 million records worldwide, 23 million of them in the German-speaking market (according to Wikipedia). Of course, despite his popularity in German-speaking countries, his “number one country” was all the time Czechoslovakia. He was extremely popular especially among ladies, that admired love song sung but “divine Karel”. Some of them had his photo on their night tables. He was not just a singer, but a phenomenon, something like “a national treasure”. Just as an illustration: he was awarded 41 times (even in 2017) as the country's best male singer in the annual *Zlatý slavík* or later *Český slavík* (Golden/Czech Nightingale) national music award. That is also why media cover his death so widely now in 2019.

Of course, the fact that he was popular during communist era (and that he *was allowed* to be popular that time) meant that he had to be very loyal to the regime. In 1977 a group of artists presented a manifest *Charter 77*, a manifest against the totalitarian communist regime. Communists constructed a document against it (unofficially called “anti-Charter”) and let some pro-regime artists to sign it. Karel Gott has been one of “anti-Charter” signatory, although, of course, it was probably not his personal will – the refusal of signing would probably mean stop for his career. Nevertheless, because of this and many other reasons some people condemn Gott as being too “pro-regime” or even calling him “a face of communist totalitarian regime”.

It is difficult to judge, but there is a fact, that not all singers, novelists or playwrights were like Karel Gott. Some of them decided voluntarily to be banned by the regime, doing manual work as depot agents or door-keepers. One of such artists was also playwright Václav Havel, later president of Czechoslovakia and then Czechia. Some other artists decided for emigration (it they had a chance to pass through the “iron curtain” to the democratic part of the world). An example of these was Karel Kryl (born 1944, died 1994), a folk singer making songs with his own words and music. During Karel Gott's career, Karel Kryl lived in Munich and of course, his songs were banned in Czechoslovakia. People had problems even when found to have records of his songs; nevertheless, many people did so and they made illegal copies for their friends.

During the “Velvet Revolution” of 1989, when communist regime collapsed in Czechoslovakia, Karel Gott and Karel Kryl met together; 4th December 1989 they were singing together the Czechoslovak national anthem in front of the completely full Wenceslas Square (Václavské náměstí) in Prague. This was supposed a symbol of a new unity of pro-regime and anti-regime artists, in the sense of the catchword “we are not the same as they are”, that means, “we are not going to do any revenge, we are merciful”. But even today, after 30 years, some people disagree.