

## Zahradníček's blog for English speaking students

### Part twenty five: 17<sup>th</sup> November, or 28<sup>th</sup> October?

Czechs have not so many public holidays as some other nations, but still they are more than for example forty years ago; in 70-s, even some Saturdays were “working Saturdays”. The only holiday were 1<sup>st</sup> January, Easter Monday, 1<sup>st</sup> May, 9<sup>th</sup> May (in Russia, 9<sup>th</sup> May is celebrated and not the 8<sup>th</sup> May as the “V-day”, and in the former “Eastern block” that had to be the same), and 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> December. Now there are more religious holidays: Good Friday; 5<sup>th</sup> July as a day of “heavenly protectors of (not only) Moravia”, Saints Cyril and Methodius; 28<sup>th</sup> September as St. Wenceslas day (who is heavenly protector of Bohemia). One more is maybe not fully religious – 24<sup>th</sup> December as the “Christmas Eve” (atheist Czechs often consider 24<sup>th</sup> December and not the 25<sup>th</sup> December to be the “top of Christmas”, but this is for another blog). Two more not religious holidays exist now, too. 28<sup>th</sup> October has been re-implemented already in 1988 by communist as a sign of “warming”. 28<sup>th</sup> October 1918, at the end of the World War I, Czechoslovakia was formed as an independent country. Communist regime did not celebrate this day too much, as the 1<sup>st</sup> Czechoslovak republic (1918–1938) was a “capitalist country” (although in fact, the regime was quite leftist and for example some possessions of nobles, especially German-speaking nobles, was expropriated already in 1919). In 1988, at the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the communists tried to show a “more human face” of the totalitarian regime, and one of the symptoms was proclaiming the 28<sup>th</sup> October a new (or better, old-new) public holiday.

If communists did not like 28<sup>th</sup> October too much, Nazi regime hated it completely; in 1939, the celebration of this day was suppressed by force. Some students were injured, some other killed. One medical student, Jan Opletal, was seriously injured and died in a hospital 11<sup>th</sup> November 1939. His funeral took place 15<sup>th</sup> November 1939 in Prague, and the funeral became another big demonstration against the Nazi regime. Two days later, 17<sup>th</sup> November 1939, the Nazi decided to close down all Czech universities – they said that it is just temporary, by they were closed until the war finished in 1945. In 1941, 17<sup>th</sup> November became the “International Students' Day”, the only “international day” that has its origin in Czechia or Czechoslovakia. So, although many people do not know it, the both public holidays, 28<sup>th</sup> October and 17<sup>th</sup> November, are closely connected.

In 1989, celebration of the 17<sup>th</sup> November converted to a student protest against the communist regime. It was suppressed by police, 568 people were injured. This has started the process recently known as the “velvet revolution”. Next days students continued to protest, but police already did not suppress the protests, and negotiations between the communist government and the students, but later also other independent people, have been started. After the weekend (18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> November), on Monday 20<sup>th</sup> November, students started to strike not only in Prague, but also in all other university cities (in Brno, the author of this blog was one of them). During one month, the regime collapsed, Václav Havel was elected for president, and free elections started to be prepared for June 1990.

Both holidays started to be celebrated more strongly in 2018 and 2019, as in 2018 it was 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Czechoslovakia, and in 2019 it was 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 17<sup>th</sup> November 1939 and 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 17<sup>th</sup> November 1989. But for some people, these holidays are not just history – the commemoration of these holidays also means vigilance, that the freedom and democracy is not automatic and that it should be protected.

That is why it was on purpose just 16<sup>th</sup> November 2019, one day before the anniversary, when 250 thousands of people came to the Letná plain in Prague to protest against the Czech prime minister Babiš, that was sooner accused of abusing of EU subsidies; the people were worried that Babiš may influence the investigation of his case.

Anyway, Czechia is now a democratic country, and it is very good that international students may study here.

By the way, it is funny, that the day when Czech Republic started to exist after disunion with Slovakia (1<sup>st</sup> January 1993) is celebrated only as the “New Year”. Only Slovaks celebrate it as “Day of Republic Foundation”.