

Zahradníček's blog for English speaking students

Part twenty six: *Polka, or valčík?*

International students are sometimes surprised that so many Czech people know how to dance various dances. Well, dancing has a long tradition in Bohemia and Moravia. People used to dance folklore dances at feasts. A typical one was *pouť* (in Bohemia) or *hody* (in Moravia), a several days traditional feast, in each village every year in the same term (plus-minus several days). Usually the date has been related with a saint – if a village had a church, the church was dedicated to one saint, and in the Calendar of saints it was possible to find a day „belonging“ to that saint. The Austrian emperor Joseph II. that ruled also in Bohemia and Moravia between 1780 and 1790 tried to reduce the number of the feasts, as people often had a feast in their village, the week after another feast in the neighbouring village, and so on. So the emperor decided that all villages have to celebrate the feast in the third weekend in October, when the crop harvesting was usually already finished. But after his death, majority of the villages started to do the feast in its original timing, or they had two feasts instead of one. – Another typical feast is carnival feast (*masopust* in Bohemia, *ostatky* in Moravia), a February or March feast of saying goodbye to meat (after the carnival, the Ash Wednesday starts the forty days of lent, finishing at Easter). – All these feasts use to be full of music and dancing, typical types of sweets and other meals.

Of course, besides the folklore dancing, there existed also dances of nobles in castles and later in the dancing halls, there existed dancing schools and professional dancers, especially in the 20th century.

Nevertheless, the golden time for „dancing for all“ started in fifties or sixties. The dancing courses started to be organized like a mass activity. It started to be bound to a certain class in a secondary school or an apprentice training centre. So, nearly all 16-years old young people in Czechoslovakia went to these dancing courses, called firstly *taneční kursy* and then simply *taneční*, that means, the original adjective „dancing“ became a noun, and not only a noun, but a phenomenon. It was a social event, a team-building for the class, a place for the first loves and first betrayals. Every week the whole class came to a dancing hall, or just a gym hall, to learn *valčík*, *polka*, but also *cha cha*, *jive*, *tango*, *waltz* and other dances. Usually the courses were made for several classes together, and the organizers tried to put together classes with majority of girls (like future hair-dressers) and classes with majority of boys (like future car mechanics) so that finally there would be about the same numbers of both genders. Sometimes it did not work precisely, as girls usually stayed, but boys sometimes escaped to a neighbouring pub to drink beer bought by one of them who had repeated a class and so he was already 18 years old. Two or three times during the course they had the „prolonged lesson“ (*prodloužená*), their parents were invited and it was expected that the boys would dance with their mothers and the girls with their fathers.

After the „Velvet revolution“ the system changed just a little. Now there are probably more students that do not come to *taneční*, either because they do not want, or for budget reasons (although the courses are never very expensive). But the tradition keeps being alive.

The dancing schools were (and are) usually organised in the second or third year of the secondary school. In the last year the secondary schools usually organized (and still organize) a dancing party, where all students were decorated by a tape with inscription. That is why these events are called *stužkovací večírek*, tape-decorating evening. The inscriptions were sometimes serious, sometimes funny, but usually the students kept them as commemoration of the last year and the moments before the school-leaving exam.

Only few people keep dancing at a good level after this experience in the youth; nevertheless, majority of them remember at least some basic steps of *valčík* (the quick waltz) and *polka*, the two most popular dances, even today danced in nearly every village.