

**PROFESSOR PAVEL OLIVA, THE HISTORIAN  
OF THE FATE OF HIS FAMILY**

In addition to the previous obituary, we would like to honour the memory of professor Pavel Oliva also with a text that was published in Czech on the occasion of his 95th birthday.<sup>1</sup> The text depicted Professor Oliva not only as a reputed researcher in the field of ancient history, but also revealed other aspects of his personality which we would like to present to the international research community.

A leading representative of Czechoslovak and Czech classical studies, Professor Pavel Oliva made a considerable contribution to the international research in various areas of ancient history. He was also very active in the area of popular science, opening the secrets of his beloved Antiquity to several generations of readers. In addition, he was a keen organiser of academic and popular events in the field of classical studies and actively sought international contacts for the Czech classics community. But these are words that have been repeated over and over on every Oliva's anniversary, and we do not feel the need to repeat them again. We would like to acquaint the international research community with his book entitled *Osudy mé rodiny* (*The Fate of my Family*, Prague 2017) which not only collects personal memories and reflections, but also represents the output of Oliva's meticulous heuristic work. The author drew information from the family archive, as well as documents and records kept by various organizations (facsimiles, photographs and various other appendices take up about one third of the 236-page book). As a historian, Oliva approached the varied historical evidence with great sense of system and classification. He paid considerable attention to clear chronology and methodically kept a certain distance from the social events and facts which he was addressing. His account is very fresh, but rather succinct – just as most of his other texts. The concise arrangement of the book and the incredibly reliable memory of Professor Oliva demonstrate that his age was nothing but a number.

Professor Oliva's aspiration to map the fate of his family and review his own life is so obvious that the author did not need to add any explanatory foreword and started with the topic itself.

The first part of the book introduces Professor Oliva's ancestors, the lives of about ten families related to the Jewish Ohrenstein family (the original name of Professor Oliva) from Soutice near Zruč nad Sázavou. One thing that was common to all these families

<sup>1</sup> 'Profesor Pavel Oliva, historik osudů své rodiny'. *Avrīga. Zprávy Jednoty klasických filologů* 60/2, 2018, 86–90. The translation has been edited. Our thanks go to the author and the *Avrīga* journal who consented to the publication of the translation.

was that many of their members never returned from transports to Nazi concentration camps. Professor Pavel Oliva followed the genealogy and fates of the families from the generation of his grandparents, and retraced their stories not only with great respect and reverence for his ancestors and relatives, but with the evident purpose to pass the tradition to his present-day family. By the way, I was surprised to learn that the prominent figures of Czech theatre Oto and Jiří Ornest, as well as the promising prematurely deceased poet Jiří Orten were Oliva's relatives. Their surnames are all derived from the original family name Ohrenstein.

In the next part, the text partly turns into an autobiography. Oliva speaks about his childhood and teenage years spent in the Prague neighbourhood of Žižkov. He shares his warm memories of his parents and the studies and the grammar school where he developed his passion for classical studies. He describes his visits to theatres and cinemas and mentions the poems which he wrote under the name P. Oliva. His pen name referred to the strong symbolic meaning of the tree in the Ancient Greek culture. Oliva confesses to his strong affections for the Prague football club Sparta. He describes his vivid memories of the funeral of the famous Czech writer and politician Alois Jirásek, his impressions of Czech president T. G. Masaryk riding a horse at the head of the parade on Wenceslas Square, and the memory of his funeral... This part dedicated to personal recollections ends with the establishment of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.

Then comes the darkest period of Oliva's life – the Protectorate, the Holocaust, three and a half years in concentration camps. Pavel Oliva has already revealed the tragedy of his family in a thin book entitled *Holokaust mé rodiny* (*My Family Holocaust*, Prague 2009). Even in his descriptions of the “life” and work conditions in concentration camps, he always tried to keep a distance and avoid emotional engagement, but it is very obvious how painful it was to remember. For readers who have never seen anything of the kind, it is hard to imagine the reality of transports of thousands of which only one survived. It is hard to understand the sort of evil which took millions of innocent lives; the monstrous mechanism of the ideology that used its perfect technology and methodology of oppression; seamless and yet unpredictable bureaucracy; the carousel of coincidence, luck or destiny which decided about life or death – whether one was transported from a “really bad” camp to a “better” one. In Oliva's case, the sequence was Terezín – Auschwitz-Birkenau – Schwarzhede, and then with the Death March back to Terezín where he welcomed the liberation on 7 May 1945.

Pavel Oliva was lucky. He was among the few of his wide family who survived. He lost both his parents and his younger brother. Many of the survivors could not help asking: Why me, why not them? And many suffered from undeserved twinges of conscience. Oliva's future life is a strong demonstration of his conviction that his survival was a gift which should be repaid by finishing his studies, having a family, taking a meaningful job, and mainly always cherishing his respect for life, modesty, honour, and mental resilience.

The “new life” brought new dynamic changes as early as in 1945. Pavel Oliva finished his secondary studies and continued to university, choosing classical Latin and Greek (graduated in 1949). Like many of his peers who had the same experience, he joined the Communist Party. To distance himself from the war trauma, he changed his name to Oliva, once his pen name. The new existence of the Oliva family started in 1949, when Oliva married his secondary school friend Věra Pávová (1926–2015), later an important

historian who focused her research on the interwar period. Pavel and Věra Oliva lived together for over sixty-five years, supporting each other in their activities. Professor Oliva's marriage was extremely important to him, as evidenced by his decision to use his wedding photograph on the cover of his book. A meticulous historian, Oliva included comprehensive information about the Páv family in the history of his own family.

After a short teaching career at the University of Political and Economic Sciences and the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague, Oliva joined the Institute of History of the newly established Czech Academy of Sciences in 1952. This was the beginning of his research career which gradually transformed him into a historian focusing on the Antiquity, without ever ceasing to be a classical philologist as well.

In addition to his research activities, Pavel Oliva took an active part in the organisation of the whole academy. The new social reality of the time opened new opportunities especially for young researchers. Oliva became a member-correspondent, he was entrusted to manage the historical collegium, and took important roles at the Institute of History and some of the committees of the Academy. Although he held influential positions within the academic community of historians, he was never a part of the dogmatic stream of science (and/or politics), and never profited from other people's misfortune. He always worked very hard in favour of his colleagues. His opportunities and activities were considerably limited after he was expelled from the Communist Party after the purges of 1970. He was retrospectively accused as one of the authors of the so-called "Black Book" published by the Institute of History (where Oliva was the deputy-director) in late 1968 and entitled *Sedm pražských dnů* (*Seven Days in Prague*). Earlier the same year, his wife, Professor Věra Olivová was also expelled from the party. The consequences were, however, much harsher for her and she was prevented from pursuing her original academic career. Pavel Oliva later joined the Centre for Greek, Roman and Latin Studies where he was permitted to publish his work, because classical studies were not as ideologically exposed as history. His membership in multiple international learned societies and his position within the Czech academic community even allowed him to travel abroad, albeit on a very limited scale.

Oliva's academic renown within both the Czech and international academic community won him numerous invitations to international stays and conferences, as well as offers of membership in the bodies and committees of leading international associations. In his book, Oliva often mentioned his meetings and collaboration with internationally recognised researchers (such as George Thomson, Victor Ehrenberg, Kazimierz Kumaniecki, Arnaldo Momigliano, Moses I. Finley, Andrew Robert Burn, etc.). He also included many interesting observations about the work and atmosphere in academic institutions and universities at the time when very little was known about them in Czechoslovakia. Since professor Oliva was always internationally regarded as the leading representative of Czech classical studies, his international journeys, as well as his activities in the field of research and academic life, are naturally a part of the history of Czechoslovak and Czech classical studies. His memoir passages, however subjective, provide invaluable insight into the history of the field, both in terms of events and chronology.

Along with the passages about his career, Oliva devoted a good part of his book to his family, an inseparable and unneglectable part of his life. The narrative tie (or even amalgamation) between both topics can be expected in a book which uses memories as

a source of information and defines the recording of the memories as its goal. Věra was Pavel's companion at many of his international academic and private journeys. Oliva liked to recall these experiences, displaying exceptionally detailed memory. It seems that the memories of his wife helped Professor Oliva recollect related details. The husband and wife first collaborated in the academic area on the book about Spartacus (1960). Their scopes of interest converged after Věra was forced to relinquish politically exposed history and started her research in the history of sports and games, largely relying on the rich evidence from Antiquity. Pavel and Věra were inseparable. Professor Oliva ended his book about the "fate of his family" at the moment of his wife's death. But before that, he gradually gave more space in the book to his daughter Hana and son Ivan, their families and lives. Oliva speaks openly about the ups and downs of his family, the events are described or explained in the relevant political and social context. His narrative style is very vivid and likeable. Oliva as a husband, father and grandfather proudly confesses to his affections, respect and love for his family. Professor Oliva loved to remember. He wrote the history of his family primarily for his family, with great endeavour and responsibility. Indeed, he was the best person to do that.

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