

**“I WOULD LEAVE THE REST FOR THE OBITUARY.”
IN MEMORY OF HELENA KADEČKOVÁ**

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(translated by Alena Dvořáková)

In the minds of both scholars and lay readers the name of Helena Kadečková (14 August 1932 – 30 June 2018) evokes Iceland and its literary culture, both old and modern. She had spent over half a century working to create and shape awareness of Icelandic and Norwegian histories and cultures while passing on to others, through everything she did, her love for the literatures of both these Nordic countries. Her substantial efforts were recognized in the highest accolades awarded her by both the Icelandic and the Norwegian peoples.

Helena Kadečková was born in Prague. She was the only child of Anna Kadečková, née Pešková, and Václav Kadečka, who both came from the village of Katovice in South Bohemia. According to various testimonies, their daughter grew up to be an independent-minded solitary attracted by adventure and untrodden paths. Her life was nevertheless characterised by rare constancy: she lived her entire life in the Strašnice quarter of Prague, and spent 53 years of her working life teaching in one university department. She treasured singleness but also friendships, and regularly met up with friends, former classmates from her grammar school and university years as well as with colleagues in other philological and historical fields of study whose work she avidly followed. She always enjoyed getting to know new places, and as long as she was able for it, kept returning to both Katovice and Iceland.

Helena Kadečková always thought that the groundwork of her education had been laid during her studies at the George of Lobkowitz Square Grammar School in Prague after the end of the second world war. When the school was dissolved after the Communist coup of 1948, she successfully graduated from the Kubelíkova Street Grammar School (1951) and, after spending a year working for Czech radio, went on to study German and Danish at the Arts Faculty of Charles University in Prague. In 1957 she got her first chance to spend some time as a visiting student at the University of Reykjavík in Iceland. While there she got to know life in Iceland as well as the Icelandic language at first hand. She became friends not only with contemporary Icelandic writers (among them Halldór Laxness, Þórbergur Þórðarson and Guðbergur Bergsson) and future Icelandic scholars from many different parts of the world but also, as a hired help, with fishermen and other workers employed in a factory, on a farm, or in the herring-salting business.

The lively style characteristic of Helena Kadečková's translations as well as her writing and story-telling stemmed from her ability to combine scholarly erudition with non-academic “school of life” experience. The literary work she leaves behind is none-

theless the product of a “labour of love” she conducted “on the side”, as it were, beside the central occupation and calling of her life, which was to teach while building up and developing Nordic studies at Charles University in Prague (1958–2011).

The list of Icelandic and Norwegian authors whose works Helena Kadečková translated into Czech starting in the mid-1960s is well known: from Icelandic, Jóhann Ólafur Sigurðsson, Þórbergur Þórðarson, Halldór Stefánsson, Halldór Laxness, Guðbergur Bergsson, Friða Á. Sigurðardóttir, Jón Kalman Stefánsson, Auður Ava Ólafsdóttir, Gyrðir Eliasson, Sjón; from Norwegian, Cora Sandel, Knut Hamsun, Liv Ullmann, Tarjei Vesaas and others. At the same time she also received high praise for her translations of medieval literary works of Nordic origin, such as *The Ynglinga Saga* and *Edda* by Snorri Sturluson (1988 and 2003); *The Legend of Amleth, Prince of Jutland, as Told in the Gesta Danorum by Saxo Grammaticus* (1996); *Old Icelandic Tales* and *The Völsunga Saga and Other Legendary Sagas* (both volumes, published in 1999 and 2011 respectively, in collaboration with Veronika Dudková). She also prepared the Czech editions of *Nordic Ballads* (2000) and *the Poetic Edda* (2004) as translated by Ladislav Heger.

Helena Kadečková was also an original author and a gifted story-teller. Among her scholarly works are a doctoral dissertation on Þórbergur Þórðarson’s *Letter to Laura and the Origins of Modern Icelandic Literature* (1967), a university textbook on *The History of Nordic Literatures in the Medieval Period* (1989, 1993 and 1997), two history volumes entitled *The History of Iceland* (2001, 2009) and *The History of Norway* (2005, in collaboration with Miroslav Hroch and Elisabeth Bakke), and a comprehensive overview of *Modern Scandinavian Literatures 1870–2000* (2006 and 2013, in collaboration with Martin Humpál and Viola Parente-Čapková). But beside these scholarly works and many forewords and afterwords to various volumes, Helena Kadečková is also the author of a touching book for children called *Óli, Your Friend from Iceland* (1971), in collaboration with Adolf Born) and of a collection of stories entitled *Twilight of the Gods: Nordic Myths and Legends* (1998, 2009 and 2018). Last but not least, in 2017 she completed the first version of her memoir which she called *Life with Iceland* (forthcoming).

I never got to know Helena Kadečková in her role as a teacher – loved and feared in equal measure in the recollections of her pupils and colleagues. We met during editorial work on four of her translations for the Plus and Kalich publishing houses. She always chose carefully what to translate, and she was a fast but reliable worker, both self-critical and open to criticism and correction. She cared immensely for the rhythm of her sentences and for precision in naming, going to great lengths to consult proper terminology with experts in the field (be they botanists or baby clothes shop assistants). During our collaboration she only took exception once, over my draft of an editor’s note to her last translation – which was the Danish work *Advent* by the Icelandic writer Gunnar Gunnarsson (also known as *The Good Shepherd* in English). I dared to suggest that the novella bears a special significance for the Czech reader and for the development of Nordic studies in the Czech Republic, because it had once made a young student called Helena Kadečková fall in love with Icelandic literature. She, however, would have none of this clumsy attempt to sing her praises and glossed it in the margins as follows: “I would leave the rest for a review (or the obituary).”

I myself benefitted hugely from Helena Kadečková’s “school of life”: from seeing how she made her peace with illness-related restrictions, how she put her last things in order

and how, to the very last day, she continued to think of her friends and pupils, to reflect on her own actions, courageously take responsibility and make decisions for herself. Toward dying and the machinery of health care she took a stance inspired by, as she herself saw it, Bohumil Hrabal's example: instead of resigning herself she chose to note significant moments, be they absurd or encouraging, and re-tell them as amusing stories. And sometimes she just could not resist laughing out loud: as, for example, when she had to read through an overlong and wholly incomprehensible document nonetheless entitled Informed Patient Consent. "It really is interesting, this whole process of passing away. I can't say it is not entertaining," she once observed. To the very end she remained on a journey, fully engaged in a situation not of her own choosing – but she named it freely for what it was, transformed it into her own story and remained curious about what would come next. What mattered a lot to her in the last days of her life, which she spent in The Good Shepherd Hospice in Čerčany, was having an open view of the surrounding garden and landscape.

So I do hope that Helena Kadečková can now follow and gloss on our endeavours from a friendly place, with a view to an infinite horizon and in the presence of all the beauty and goodness she searched out and passed on to others throughout her life.