

One hundred years of teaching Egyptology in Czech

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This year, the Czech Institute of Egyptology celebrated a centenary of lecturing Egyptology in the Czech language at Charles University. In April 1919, František Lexa, at that time a grammar school teacher of mathematics, physics and philosophy and newly appointed private senior lecturer (“Privatdozent”), began to give lectures in Egyptology at the Czech Faculty of Arts of Charles University (fig. 1). At an age of 43, he had just started the second half of his long and prolific life (Žába 1960; Bareš 1989 and 2014; Bierbrier 2012: 329–330).

In teaching Egyptology in Prague, Lexa was in fact preceded by Nathaniel Reich who, in the same capacity as a “Privatdozent”, had lectured on Egyptology since 1913 (Oerter 2006 and 2007; Oerter 2010: 96–111, 152–154; Gertzen – Oerter 2017; Bierbrier 2012: 458), however at the German Faculty of Arts of the University – the originally unified Carlo-Ferdinand University had been in 1882 divided into German and Czech parts (Oerter 2003a and Oerter 2010: 112–126). Sporadic courses dealing with the ancient Egyptian language had been offered at the University even before, e.g. by Professor of Semitic languages Max Grünert (1849–1929; Oerter 2010: 44), and some questions pertaining to the history and art of ancient Egypt had also been touched on by Miroslav Tyrš (1832–1884) in his more general lectures dealing with the history of ancient (including ancient Oriental) art shortly before his premature death (Navrátilová 2003: 101–102; Onderka – Navrátilová 2014b). A course of Coptic language was advertised in 1908 by Václav Hazuka (1875–1947), a private senior lecturer of Old Testament and Semitic languages at the Czech Faculty of Theology (Oerter 1988: 77; Oerter 2010: 14, footnote 1).

In fact, Lexa was not the first Egyptologist of Czech origin – this position goes to Giovanni Kminek-Szedlo (1828–1896), who presently counts among the founders of Italian Egyptology (Hostovská 1998; Bierbrier 2012: 298–299). Lexa’s way to Egyptology was by no means short and easy (Bareš 2007 and 2014). Born in 1876, he originally studied Mathematics, Physics and Philosophy at the Czech Faculty of Arts of the then Carlo-Ferdinand University in Prague, where he prepared for a career in grammar school teaching, graduating in 1899. In 1903, on the basis of a dissertation that, however, dealt with some problems of physics (*O zjevech magneto- a elektrostriktce po stránce theoretické i experimentální* [Phenomena of magneto- and electrostriction in theory and experiment, in Czech]), he was promoted to Doctor of Philosophy. In 1904, as a grammar school teacher in Hradec Králové, he decided to achieve the title of “Privatdozent” in Psychology. In his planned “habilitation” thesis to obtain such a title, he considered studying and discussing the psychology and development of script. Because of that, he decided to obtain personal knowledge of all

scribal systems available to him, starting with ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. In January 1905, he bought a basic grammar book (Erman 1902) written by Adolf Erman (1854–1937; Gertzen 2015; Bierbrier 2012: 180–181) and became interested in the ancient Egyptian language so much that, later in this year, he published his first short translations of ancient Egyptian texts (being, in fact, exercises in Erman’s grammar book) in the yearbook of the Hradec Králové grammar school (Lexa 1905). In 1906, another series of his translations from ancient Egyptian followed (Lexa 1906). His translations aroused the interest of Rudolf Dvořák (1860–1920), Professor of Oriental Languages at the Czech Faculty of Arts in Prague (Tauer 1960; Lomová *et al.*, *forthcoming*) who, during his study years in Leipzig in 1882/1883, also privately attended a course in ancient Egyptian taught by Georg Ebers (1837–1898; Bierbrier 2012: 169–170). With the help and backing of Dvořák, who seemingly persuaded him to seek a career in Egyptology, Lexa obtained a state scholarship that enabled him to study abroad; he spent the entire academic year 1907/1908 with Adolf Erman in Berlin and the winter term 1908/1909 with Wilhelm Spiegelberg in Strasbourg (Oerter 1986; Oerter 2010: 6–13). Already in Berlin and Strasbourg, Lexa started to prepare his “habilitation” thesis that, however, was published only in 1917 (Lexa 1917), with a shortened German version one year later (Lexa 1918).

Back in Prague, Lexa continued to teach at a grammar school even after his appointment to the position of senior private lecturer at the Faculty of Arts (Jůnová Macková 2018: 41–44). Only in 1922, did he obtain a full-time job in Egyptology as an associate professor at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University. Among the first students of Lexa, two deserve to be mentioned – Jaroslav Černý (1898–1970; Žába 1971; Růžová 2010; Onderka – Navrátilová 2014a and 2019; Navrátilová 2018; Bierbrier 2012: 110–112), whom Lexa had already met in 1917 (Růžová 2010: 153–154), and Georges Ort-Geuthner (1900–1941; Oerter 1984 and 2000; Oerter 2010: 1–5). Some courses taught by Lexa were also attended by Michel Malinine (1900–1977), who came to Prague as a Russian émigré and spent four semesters studying at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University before he moved to France in 1925 (Cenival – Posener 1982 and 1983).

After 1922, the career of Lexa followed quickly. In 1925, he founded the Egyptological Seminary at the Faculty of Arts, where he subsequently concentrated a number of students and even laymen interested in the discipline, such as Ludmila Matiegková (1889–1960; Růžová 1996: 101–102; Havlůjová 2005; Bierbrier 2012: 362), Valerie Hažmuková (1936 and 1937), Pavla Fořtová-Šámalová (1888–1974; Růžová 1996: 97–98; Bierbrier 2012: 136), and his own daughter Irena Lexová



Fig. 1 František Lexa in his eighties (photo archive of CIE)

(later Lexová-Zámotná, 1908–1999; see Růžová 1996: 98–99; Bierbrier 2012: 330), whose book on ancient Egyptian dance counts to this day among the most important sources on that subject (Lexová 1935 and 2000), to mention just a few (also Růžová 2010: 167–168). In 1927, he was appointed a regular professor of Egyptology.

Until 1930, when Jaroslav Černý came back from Egypt and obtained the position of senior private lecturer (Růžová 2010: 162–163), Lexa remained the only Egyptologist at the Faculty of Arts and, in fact, in the entirety of Czechoslovakia. As such, he addressed a broad range of subjects during his lectures. In addition to various phases of ancient Egyptian (including Coptic), he taught, *e.g.*, an introduction to Egyptian archaeology (based mostly on stelae and other texts from the tombs, in the winter term of 1924/1925) or the history of ancient Egyptian mathematics and astronomy (in 1928/1929). In the second half of the 1930's, Lexa (at that time already sixty years old) tried to obtain a full-time job for Černý at the Faculty of Arts (fig. 2), albeit without any success (Růžová 2010: 165–166).

As Černý took over the basic courses of ancient Egyptian, Lexa turned his attention more and more to his main field of interest, namely Demotic. After the death of Wilhelm Spiegelberg (in 1930) and Francis Ll. Griffith (in 1934), he was, for a while, the only professor of Egyptology in Europe who taught Demotic studies. Because of that, a number of foreign students came to

Prague to attend his lectures, such as Giuseppe Botti (1889–1968; Bierbrier 2012: 73–74), who spent several terms here. In the late 1930's, moreover, another Egyptologist moved to Prague, namely Ludwig Keimer (1892–1957; Bierbrier 2012: 291–292), whom Lexa had already met in 1930 during his long trip to Egypt (Suková 2004 and 2006; Jůnová Macková 2018: 46–47). After a much prolonged wait (he submitted his application in 1930), Keimer finally obtained the position of private senior lecturer at the German Faculty of Arts in 1938 (Oerter 2003b and 2005; Oerter 2010: 47–63, 75–88).

In 1939, following the German occupation of the Czech lands, all Czech universities were closed by the Nazi regime. The next year, Lexa was retired. At that time, Černý stayed in Egypt (Růžová 2010: 220) to where Keimer, a convinced Nazi-opponent, moved as well (Oerter 2010: 89–95; Schneider 2013: 155–156).

Shortly after the end of World War II and the liberation of Czechoslovakia, in June 1945, Lexa was re-activated and again started to give lectures in Egyptology. Later in that year, Černý joined him after his return from the United Kingdom. As his hopes for establishing his own Chair of Egyptology, *e.g.* at the Masaryk University in Brno (second largest town of the then Czechoslovakia), seemingly led to nothing, Černý applied for the position of Edwards Professor of Egyptology at the University College in London in 1946 and moved definitely to the United Kingdom (Růžová 2010: 226–227; Navrátilová



Fig. 2 Jaroslav Černý and his wife Marie in the mastaba of Ptahshepses at Abusir, together with Eugen Strouhal (photo M. Zemina)

2018: 74). In spite of that, he stayed in touch with Lexa (Jůnová Macková – Navrátilová 2015) and with their common pupil Zbyněk Žába (1917–1971; Verner 1972, Váhala 1973; Bierbrier 2012: 597), who graduated in Egyptology in 1949 and later on succeeded Lexa in the position of Professor of Egyptology at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University (Růžová 2010: 169–192; Navrátilová 2018: 71–72). Among the class-mates of Žába, Eva Jelínková/Reymond (1923–1986; see Růžová 1996: 95–96, Bierbrier 2012: 462–463) and Karel Petráček (1926–1987; see Vavroušek – Oliverius 1988a and 1988b), later Professor of Semitic languages at the Faculty of Arts, deserve mentioning, and perhaps also historian of art Milada Vilímková (1921–1992; see Růžová 1996: 100; Bierbrier 2012: 556) and František Váhala (1911–1974; Bierbrier 2012: 551), originally specialized in Czech studies who became a member of the then Czechoslovak Institute of Egyptology in 1962.

During the 1950's, Žába (appointed to the position of Reader in Egyptology in 1954) took over most of the Egyptology lecturing from the ageing Lexa (Žába 1952). At that time, certainly, the number of students of Egyptology was limited to a few, the best known among them being perhaps Evžen Neustupný, who graduated in Prehistory and Egyptology in 1957 and became, later on, one of the leading scholars specialized in the prehistory of the Czech lands (Sklenář 2005: 268–269).

Between 1958 and 1960, the position of Egyptology at the Faculty of Arts saw many changes. In 1958, the Czechoslovak (now Czech) Institute of Egyptology was established (Jůnová Macková 2017). In 1959, Lexa retired and Žába, appointed to the position of Professor of Egyptology in the same year, became his successor.

In 1960, the Institute started archaeological work in Egypt, first at Abusir and, between 1961 and 1965, in Egyptian Nubia (fig. 3) as part of the large international UNESCO campaign (Verner *et al.* 1990: 24–31; Růžová 2010: 186–192; Navrátilová 2018: 86–88).

At about the same time, the system of the study of Egyptology at the Faculty of Arts changed as well. In 1960, a relatively numerous group of students (compared to previous times) came to study Egyptology here. Only three of them, however, graduated in due time in 1965, namely Pavel Červíček (1942–2015; see Varadzinová – Vachala 2017, Vachala – Varadzinová 2018), Jaromír Málek and Miroslav Verner (fig. 4). Mainly due to the intensive archaeological work in Egypt, where Žába and other members of the Institute usually spent a considerable part of the year, a pair of students – Břetislav Vachala and the author of this paper – were admitted to the study of Egyptology only in 1970 (owing to the political reasons following the so-called Prague Spring in 1968, the number of students was limited to just two).

In the tightened political situation during the 1970's and 1980's, no new students were admitted to the study of Egyptology; in fact, following the rather premature death of Žába in 1971, even simply the study of Egyptology was almost cancelled at the Faculty of Arts. Only from 1989 onwards, in the new political situation after the fall of the Communist regime, did the study of Egyptology become a regular part of the University education at the Faculty of Arts. Since that time, the number of people graduated in Egyptology at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University has rapidly increased. Many of them – Katarína Arias (born



Fig. 3 Zbyněk Žába holding a fragment of the statue of Fifth Dynasty Vizier Ptahshepses (photo M. Zemina)



Fig. 4 Jaromír Málek, Pavel Červíček, František Váhala and Miroslav Verner (from the right) on the catamaran Sadiq en-Nuba during one of the Nubian campaigns (photo J. Novotný)

Kytnarová), Miroslav Bárta, Veronika Dulíková, Jiří Janák, Jaromír Krejčí, Renata Landgráfová, Mohamed Megahed, Jana Mynářová (born Kořínková), Martin Odler, Alexandra Pastoreková, Marie Peterková Hlouchová, Květa Smoláriková, Lenka Varadzinová (born Suková), Lucie Vendelová Jirásková and Hana Vymazalová, became members of the Czech Institute of Egyptology and take part in teaching Egyptology. At the same time, lectures in Egyptology are also given by other members of the Czech Institute of Egyptology who graduated abroad, such as Wolf B. Oerter (graduated in Leipzig) and Filip Coppens (graduated in Leuven) or by people who graduated in Egyptology at the Faculty of Arts but are now affiliated with other institutions, such as Hana Benešová, Hana Navrátilová (University of Reading), Pavel Onderka (National Museum in Prague), Ladislav Varadzin (Institute of Archaeology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague). Specialized courses are (completely or partly) also taught by other scholars, such as Petra Havelková (National Museum in Prague), specialized in Physical Anthropology and Vladimír Brůna, geodesian specialized in remote sensing.

During these last years, especially, many colleagues from abroad completed their Ph.D. studies in Prague,

the first of them being the late Ahmad A. El-Sawi already in the 1970's (Hawass 2017, Verner 2017) and, later on, Jozef Hudec (1997), a long-time co-director of the Polish-Slovak archaeological mission to Tell el-Retaba (Rzepka *et al.* 2017), Dušan Magdolen (Magdolen 1997), the present director of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava, Tarek El-Awady (2006), Mohamed Ismail Khaled (2009), Abdou Mohamed Abdou Mohamed (El-Kereti) (Abdou Mohamed 2011), and Mohamed Abd El-Moneim Megahed (2016).

In addition to the Czech Institute of Egyptology, this discipline (Egyptian religion and its history above all) is at present taught at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies of the same Faculty of Arts (by Martin Pehal, who graduated in Egyptology and Religious Studies in 2008) and at the Department of Religious Studies of the Hussite Theological Faculty of Charles University (by Jiří Janák, at the same time member of the Czech Institute of Egyptology at the Faculty of Arts).

One hundred years after Lexa gave his first lecture at the Faculty of Arts, Egyptology has thus become a firmly established component of tertiary education at Charles University and, in a more general form, an integral part of the Czech culture.

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