

JANA POLÁKOVÁ:

Čtrnáct barev Vánoc. Jiný obraz svátků očima etnologa

[Fourteen Colours of Christmas. A Different Image of the Holidays Through the Eyes of an Ethnologist]

Brno: Moravské zemské muzeum, 2018, 530 p.

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The search for innovations in the interpretation of the Christmas holiday over the last two decades consists not only of the search for new elements that have established themselves in the traditional Christmas scenario, but also in new research approaches by which the researcher captivates readers' interest with an original point of view of this "par excellence" ethnological topic. In the Czech Republic, such views were presented by, for instance, historians Petr and Pavlína Kourová, who described Christmas from the birth of the Czechoslovak Republic until 1989 (Kouroví, 2010), or by Eva Večerková and Věra Frolcová, who explained Christmas traditions in the context of Europe as a whole (Večerková, Frolcová, 2010). The new elements in the Christmas holiday in Slovakia are discussed by Zuzana Beňušková in her chapter *Why is Christmas Both Traditional and New?* (Beňušková, 2014).

The result of a larger research project on Christmas is a publication by Jana Poláková, which combines museological work with basic research to bring the most illustrative image possible of the forms of Christmas in the Czech Republic. The three-year project called *Holidays Associated with National, Ethnic and Religious Minorities in the Czech Republic* was launched in 2015. The project aimed to create an exhibition on the occasion of Christmas.

The author is known for her research on national minorities in the Czech Republic, especially the Roma, as well as for her comprehensive presentation of the results of this research in several forms. She has recently presented a research project on the Greek minority in the Czech Republic in the form of an exhibition, documentary film, and a publication under the title *Two Lives, Two Cultures, Two Countries. Greeks in the Czech Lands from the Latter Half of the 20th Century until the Present* (Poláková, 2020). The documentary film, which was produced by combining excerpts from interviews, contemporary film footage, and samples of various archival materials, won the "Černý Janek" main prize at the Musaion film festival of museum films in 2019, held at the Jan Amos Comenius Museum in Uherský Brod.

This success points to the author's rare ability to translate ethnological field research into both scientific and popular forms. The reviewed publication has such a dual character, too. It focuses on research on registered national minorities in the Czech Republic – there were fourteen of them at the time of carrying out the project. As the author notes, she conducted around 100 interviews during the research, three quarters of which corresponded to the research sample used in the publication. From among them, she chose to present transcripts of two interviews per ethnic minority, in which she illustrated the specifics of Christmas practised by that particular minority.

Hence, the key topics of the publication are Christmas among national minorities and their research using the oral history method. These two topics form the two basic chapters of the book, with the methodological one preceding the theoretical and empirical one. The author pays close attention to the methodology and course of the research in order to thoroughly clarify the circumstances of the research, including the problems she encountered

during it. She presents the sample of respondents, the method of obtaining it, the way of conducting interviews from their biographical introduction to the effort to stick to a semi-structured interview based on the chronology of the Christmas holiday. The conduct of interviews was complicated due to the diversity of respondents – not only ethnic, but also religious, the length of their stay in the Czech Republic, the experience of some of them with life in their country of origin, as well as various contexts and traumas related to immigration to the Czech Republic. The author passes onto readers all aspects and experience gained. Finally, she also explains the methodology of the processing of data from 125 hours of interview recordings. Here, too, she had to deal with data adaptation and the forms of testimony for publication purposes. She did not leave out the ethics of research. This part can be considered a research method textbook on oral history, while the second principal chapter *Christmas of National Minorities* is an illustration of this research.

The main topic of the publication – Christmas traditions and the spending of Christmas by members of ethnic minorities in the Czech Republic – is also addressed in detail. Each sub-chapter devoted to a specific ethnic minority is built on the same structure: it presents the historical context in which the ethnicity under study came to the position of a registered ethnic minority in the Czech Republic, describes its structure, and clarifies the research sample within the minority, including religious affiliation. It also reconstructs the course of Christmas within the studied minority on the basis of testimonies as well as available literature, which balances objective knowledge and subjective information from the interlocutors, and finally provides transcripts of interviews with two selected respondents per minority. This methodology is applied in each sub-chapter. Perhaps the “most exotic” sub-chapter devoted to the Vietnamese minority in Czechia proves that bringing together material on the individual minorities was not easy. The research sample included Buddhists, non-believers practicing Buddhist cultural elements, as well as one Christian woman. In the case of this minority, it was interesting to observe the knowledge of the meanings and symbols of Christmas, and the ways of spending Christmas days. Generational differences in the perception of Christmas among those who immigrated to the Czech Republic from Vietnam or among the younger generation born in the Czech Republic were also interesting to observe. The author also recorded the links between Christmas and the Vietnamese Lunar New Year holiday by keeping a decorated Christmas tree until February.

Aware of the fact that the large amount of diverse information would not lead to fundamental conclusions, she devoted the final words of the publication to a reflection on identity, adaptation, integration, assimilation, or acculturation. She also considers the



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functioning of these factors among ethnically mixed or ethnically endogamous married couples and their families.

In the scientific sphere, the publication significantly contributes to the systematic dissemination of knowledge about the ethnic minorities present and awareness of their specifics thanks to the possibility of comparison. The wider audience is led to the understanding that not everyone spends the Christmas holiday in the same way and that globalisation does not reduce its diversified perception.

The methodological introduction and the interpretation of experience gained through research and its processing can be a textbook example of the implementation of qualitative research conducted in the form of interviews. For museum staff, the publication can be an inspiration to enrich research work in the preparation of exhibitions and to convey museological knowledge to the general public.

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