

***Ceska Venice Siroky Dul*. Written by Bohuslav Salanda. 173 pp. Kolin Nezavisle centrum pro studium politiky, 2008. ISBN 978-80-86879-14-7.**

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Most of the Czech ethnographic literature has dealt with the minutiae of Bohemian and Moravian folk cultures. Village studies and comprehensive works have been relatively few and far between, but in recent years the situation has begun to change. Of particular importance is the three-volume ethnographic encyclopaedia of the folk culture of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia that appeared in 2007; on a much smaller scale, one should welcome the village study here being reviewed.

Ceska vesnice Siroky Dul [the Czech village whose name means “a wise valley”] is a slender book with only 111 pages of text, but it contains a surprising amount of interesting information. A welcome bonus to Salanda’s choice of Siroky Dul is the fact that a well-known Czech ethnographer, Karel Chotek (1881-1967), described this village in 1915. Although only 28 pages long, Chotek’s study is rich in data, covering not only various facets of the material culture but also family life, life cycle, oral folklore and expressions of folk art. Using the two sources, one can appreciate the changes that have taken place in Siroky Dul during the past hundred years. Siroky Dul, a submontane-type village, is located about 6 km (4 miles) northwest of Policka, a small town in eastern Bohemia. First mentioned as early as the 12th century, Siroky Dul reached its largest size in 1880, when it had 660 inhabitants. By mid-2008, however, it had shrunk to 378 people.

Between the introductory and concluding chapters, the author has divided the text into eight chapters. In several chapters he writes about two parts of the village, separated from each other by a small woods and an elevation of some 320 feet, as well as a creek that at one time separated the village into two manorial estates, and, until the present, by two denominational affiliations – Catholic and Protestant. This partition of the village, interestingly enough, had administrative and economic repercussions: when unified agricultural cooperation was forced on the village in 1957 by the communist government, Siroky Dul –despite its small size—ended up with two cooperatives. This rather anomalous situation changed in 1972, when the two cooperatives merged. All of these matters are discussed by the author and supported by quotations from still-living participants in these events.

In the chapter “Local political culture,” Salanda reports on some of the activities of a former head of the local administration: for example, inviting for a visit the descendants of former villagers who had left for America. (A local register of births, marriages, and deaths reveals that between 1800 and 1910 a full 135 people from the village had emigrated to the United States.)

Over the years some of the seasonal ceremonies have been discontinued, for example, carnival rounds. Other ceremonies have been observed until fairly recently – for example, the so-called burning of the witches (which continued under communism under the unobjectionable designation Flame of Peace). Still others continue to be observed—for example, the end-of-October village fair with its many outside visitors, some from as far away as Slovakia. Of particular interest are the contributions of the members of the village’s voluntary fire brigade. At one time they organized masked balls, and today they are still very active in amateur theatre performances and in certain sports, for example volleyball and *nohejbal* (a game with volleyball rules but with the ball kicked over the net).

The remaining pages of the book contain notes (pp. 119-124), bibliography (pp. 125-128), captions for the photographic illustrations (pp. 129-130), ground plans for two selected farmhouses (pp. 136-139), a German abstract (pp. 140-144), and 57 photographs (17 black-and-white and 40 in color). The subjects of the illustrative photos range from views of the village as a whole part, private farming activities, activities under the unified agricultural cooperative, architectural styles of selected village buildings, voluntary fire-fighters performing in sports and as actors, to instances of practical public joking (for example, a sign proclaiming that the twelfth five-year plan is being fulfilled at 141.5 percent –making fun of the profusion of bombastic economic slogans during the communist era).

To sum up: This handsome book is a useful contribution to our understanding of life in Bohemian villages – in this case a very small village but atypical in many respects.

A Note and References

The only Czech village study in English is one written by the present reviewer (Salzmann).

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