

Hiking across Hills and Mountains

The High Tatra

When I was leaving the Technical College in June 1963, I set off with my parents for a one-week trip to the *High Tatra*; I went there for the first time. We were hiking light, with small rucksacks only. We walked the length and breadth of the mountains: we got through Main Track¹, climbed the winding path above *Popradské Pleso*², and got through two passes – *Prielom* and *Polský Hreben*. It was before the peak season and we could enjoy the silence of valleys, watch chamois and marmots, and feast our eyes on the mountain nature. We climbed *Rysy* (2499m) and immortalized ourselves with V.I.Lenin there³. Finally we took a bath in the limpid water of *Štrbske Pleso*⁴.

We stayed overnight at mountain huts and we mainly ate dishes made of dry food – soup mix, rolled oats etc. When I returned home, I was lighter by 5 kg; at my height of 193 cm I weighed 71 kg only⁵! Mountain trips are obviously excellent means for reducing one's weight; they provide so much experience that one forgets to eat.

Next time I visited the High Tatra in June 1968. It was eventful time: the *Prague Spring* was culminating and I had just graduated at Technical University. My university colleague⁶ was guiding a group of East-German tourists there and he invited me there as his (unofficial) assistant. They were nice, mostly young people; there was one Norwegian among them, who I palled up with. I was short of money at that time and I had to forgo some meals. We diligently climbed across the mountains and we naturally also discussed the politics; they were loyal to their country, the German Democratic Republic, but they spoke reasonably. When I was saying good-bye to them at Main Railway Station in Prague, they pointed to the disorder governing there – there were lots of bums and hippies all around. The police ceased to use coercive means those times and this kind of people gathered at busy places. It must be noted however that the atmosphere was friendly and relaxed and there was not so much criminality as today.

¹ Tatranská Magistrála

² Mountain lake

³ Lenin climbed Rysy from the Polish side twice in the years 1913-1914. A memorial plaque of this event with his relief was placed there and since 1957 “Climbing Rysy by Youth” was organized.

⁴ Štrbské pleso, a lake situated at the foot of the Tatra

⁵ My present weight is about 105 kg, so I am carrying a load of 34 kg

⁶ Jiří Kostelecký



A break in the pass. From the left to right: the leader of Germans, J.Kostelecký, the Norwegian and the author. The High Tatra, June 1968.

The situation in the High Tatra was much marked by the construction of a motorway along foot of the mountains in seventies. At the same time new hotels and luxury shops were built around the motorway. Mountain tracks became crowded and one had wait in queue before some demanding stretches. Moreover, the visitors were not so disciplined as before and some tracks had to be closed to prevent devastation. I have visited the High Tatra several times since then but my impression was always mixed. A week spent in the middle of Tatra's nature has only remained a memory.

Romania – the Carpathians

After finishing military service in August 1969 I was enrolled for a one-year stage at the Institute of Macromolecular Chemistry⁷ in Prague. There I palled up with Jarda⁸ with whom we set off for a hitch-hiking peregrination across Romania in July 1970. We had prepared carefully for the trip: we waterproofed the tent, took pills for treating water for drinking, and we also learned some elements of the Romanian language. We went by train from Prague to Cluj and set off by hitch-hiking to Constanca, a town situated on the coast of the Black Sea. There lived a pen-friend of my sister Lída⁹. We simultaneously bought tickets with reservation for the return, but from a different place – from Brasov in north Romania, at the foot of the Transylvanian Alps.

Hitch-hiking is quite common in Romania but the hikers pay for the lift. The hikers often travel in the body of vans, loaded with various materials or animals, e.g. pigs. We first traveled in an empty refrigerator van, together with a Romanian student. When the driver asked us for money, the student helped us to persuade him that we are traveling to recognize the country and we shouldn't pay. We had never paid for a lift and some of the drivers expressed sympathy for us, because Romania was on our side during the Soviet invasion in August 1968.

⁷ The institute was established by Otto Wichterle, the inventor of eye lenses. In 1970 he was removed from the post of director due to his political engagement

⁸ Jaroslav Kratochvíl

⁹ They got acquainted via organized friendship of schools

We also wanted to go to the nearby mountains. As we had no detailed map, we headed haphazardly to the nearest mountain range. The path led us into a valley. We passed by a herd of small cattle and climbed onto the ridge. There were deserted pastures overgrown with weeds. We met nobody there. We went downhill along a brook and came to a railway line. As we went along the track, a dog ran from a kennel and bit me, but it wasn't grave. We went on across an undulating steppe; there were neither trees nor fields. We met a man dressed in traditional cloth pants. "*Chleba dala mu! Cigaretta dala mu! Lei dala mu!*" begged he in an odd Slavonic language¹⁰. There was a skinny horse grazing nearby. Then we met a group of boys – they begged in a similar way. We came to a village. There were gardens with flowers around the houses surrounded by wooden fences. We communicated with the people there in Russian.



On the mountain path (J. Kratochvíl). Romania, 1970.

We got a lift to the centre of Bucharest. The city looked rather ugly – the “Stalin-Rococo” prevailed, so we didn't stay long. We tried to ask somebody how to get to the clearway but with no success. Finally we got at random, on a tram. There was a group of children who understood what we wanted and they showed us the way. We found ourselves on the periphery amidst wooden shacks and roaming dogs. It was getting dark. We looked for a place to camping and finally we slept in a corn field near the highway. The traffic was high even in the night – gypsy carts were rushing by.

¹⁰ “Give me bread! Give me cigarettes! Give me money (*lei*)!”



Urban development in Bucharest, Romania 1970

When I woke up in the morning, I felt languid and had a fever. We got a lift to the Danube ferry in the body of a van. It took an hour until the ferry came. It was very hot. I hid in the shade on the other bank and Jarda was scrapping up a lift. We were lucky – a car took us to the house of my sister's friends in Constanca. They stood up for us immediately – but I got strong diarrhea and I had to spend most time at their Turkish privy combined with a shower. There were other Czech people staying there and they took me to hospital.

I was investigated by a German-speaking doctor who made fun of me that I travel by hitch-hiking being a physicist. I lay in a room together with a Slovak medical student who was down with pneumonia. He described to me all the difficulties he had to overcome before he got here and the scandalous situation in Romanian medical care. I was lucky – I had dysentery and its treatment was free due to Czech-Romanian agreement. I was discharged in four days.

I met with Jarda, but by some coincidence we lost each other; we possibly wanted to live it up in one's own way. I roamed one or two days along the shore and then I bought the ticket for Brasov¹¹. This town belongs to the region with a German-speaking minority. I visited the winter resort situated on a mountain plain. The buildings there looked like timbered Walachian houses in north Moravia. I joined two Belgian tourists and we undertake a trip along the surrounding ridge with conserved flora.

¹¹ In fact, it was quite complicated to get it: I had to ask my sister's friend for help. We had to go to a travel agency and wait in a long queue.



In the mountains above Brasov, Romania 1970

When I was returning back to the town, there was a swimming pool on the way. I wanted to swim a little there but the hygienic conditions were awful. On the way to the railway station I met Jarda and we took our train for home. We told each other our experience and were lucky that our adventure turned out to be with no harm.

From Romania I went directly to Roznov, where I joined the development division of TESLA Roznov Electronics¹² in August 1970. I was rather thin and had no money – I only ate bread and buttermilk. Shortly later a group of young workers appeared at our division who graduated in Bratislava. I found a friend among them – Jura Neradil. We shared a common hobby – hiking.

The local hiking club organized regular trips in western Slovakia, especially to *Vrátna Valley* in the Little Fatra and the *Rohace* in the West Tara¹³. We took part on their trips and made a plan for a ridgewalk all around the Rohacska Valley¹⁴. Jura prepared a detailed plan – drinking during the walk being the main point. We prepared a 2-liter can of water with lemon juice.

In the darkness we got up and set off at the crack of dawn. We kept a moderate tempo and went on according the plan. In the middle of the way, a group of our friends appeared behind us, obviously trying to catch us up. Suddenly they disappeared – they had to descend to a lake and allegedly they drank all the water in it. Our ridgewalk took about 16 hours; at sunset we were descending into our camp.

After this success we bought a tent and wanted to walk the length and breadth of the west Slovakia. However we only undertook one 3-days trip. Jura got married and I had to undergo the surgery of meniscus. I only got back to arduous hiking a few years later, when I worked at the detachment of the Slovak Academy of Science in *Piestany*¹⁵.

¹² TESLA Rožnov in Rožnov pod Radhoštěm

¹³ Vrátna dolina (Malá Fatra), Roháče (Západní Tatry)

¹⁴ Roháčska dolina

¹⁵ Piešťany, west Slovakia. I worked there from October 1978.

There was an agile hiking club at Piestany that organized walks in the city environs and coach trips. In summer 1979 I went with them for a trip in Low Tatra. We undertook two ridgewalks; we walked light and even ran in some stretches. It was great mental refreshment for me after so many troubles experienced during previous years. I also took part in football and volleyball matches organized by workers of the Academy. Unfortunately I hurt my operated knee in one of the matches which excluded me from long walks and runs.



The Low Tatra, summer 1979, the hikers from Piestany



The Low Tatra, on Dumbier (2043)



In the Javorníky hills, 1982, hikers from Piestany and a local farmer

Pentecost on Radhost

The young people from the Walachian region traditionally celebrated Pentecost on the legendary hill Radhost, which towers high above the valley of the Bečva¹⁶. They camped on the top of the hill and entertained themselves in various ways. It was announced in 1975 that a boy died there due to overdose with “chiculi”, a cloth cleaner that was sniffed as a drug. This was probably the reason why the Socialist Youth Organization wanted to give a political framework to these celebrations. They organized a “*Summer Meeting of Youth with the Representatives of Party and Government*” on the ridge of Radhost.

By coincidence, there was a march organized on the same day and I took part in it while away the time. The weather was slim – it was windy and it rained. The start was at Roznov and the route continued on Radhost and along the ridge to Pustevny. This stretch looks like a promenade on sunny days. There were few participants in the march; a young man walking before me held an umbrella which was pulled away by the wind. In the middle of the ridge, there was a row of notice-boards announcing pledges to socialist cause and their discharging. At a nearby stage, there was a group of boys and girls in traditional Walachian costumes, prepared for a performance.

I don't know how the meeting went on. When I was turning back in the evening over the top of Radhost, the weather was mild, it had cleared up. As I was descending down the hillside, I met a group of young people in military camouflage dresses heading uphill.

¹⁶ Radhošť (1129), Bečva, the river flowing through Rožnov pod Radhoštěm

Heaven on the Earth

In 1961 I spent a part of my summer holidays at Vsetín, an industrial town lying in the Walachian region. Together with two my classmates¹⁷ I took temporary work at MEZ Vsetín Works, producing electrical power equipment. While my mates were enjoying their leisure time at various pleasures, I was hiking in the surrounding highlands. The Walachian Highlands are dotted with small farms – the Walachians used to be shepherds¹⁸. The highlanders are hospitable – they brought me willingly a glass of water whenever I asked for it.

I was hiking light, only in shorts and when I came to some dwelling, I tended to wear more clothing. At our weekend house we used to wear shabby clothes and when we went to the village for shopping we were instructed to change. However the highlanders received me better only in shorts. They were modest, hard working people.

Nine years later, when I decided to leave Prague, this experience inspired me to join TESLA Rožnov Works in the same region. Unfortunately, the times were getting worse – the “normalization” had just begun and the working conditions were turning for the worse. I was hiking in the highlands, both alone and with friends but leisure time was waning...

At one of the organized trips however, I got acquainted with an extraordinary girl – the “101%-hiker” Blanka¹⁹. She worked at TESLA Rožnov and tirelessly was hiking and organized trips. I joined her together with my friend Jura, but the problem lay in the way she acted – she permanently instructed the others what to do, where to look etc. We tolerated that (but sometimes did make fun of her), but some hikers refused to join her. She always put on a solemn face, she couldn’t take a joke.



With Blanka in the rocks, 1972

We took part in the “*Winter Passage through the Valleys of Slovak Paradise*”. Slovak Paradise is an exceptional national park with deep canyons that can only been passed in winter. But most of all we hiked with Blanka in the nearby rocks on the Slovak side²⁰. At one of our trips there was eighty-year-old gentleman among us who fought in First World War.

¹⁷ František Šebesta, Petr Škoda; we studied electrical engineering at Technical College in Prague

¹⁸ And according to a legend they came from Romania, confer above

¹⁹ Blanka Růžičková from Valašské Meziříčí

²⁰ Súľovské skály, Pulčínské skály

He told us how he served on the front line and was sent to make a passage in the barriers for the morning attack. He crawled to the barriers but got into fire. He hid in a ditch filled with water and had to stay there till morning. The water froze over him.

A few years later, about in 1976, Blanka introduced me to Agnes²¹, a girl from the highlands. Vasek's farm was near Solan (861m)²², belonging to the village Hutisko. I found there a refuge in the difficult times and I could also recognize their way of farming. The life is rather hard there, but highlanders seldom leave their homes – the hills have a charm. One of farm's cottages was used by hikers from Brno which brought a lively social life. We were breathing there freely– the “normalization” didn't reach so high.

Originally I walked barefoot everywhere – the paths were covered with grass. Gradually, however, people started to use cars and motorcycles instead of carts and horses and the paths were graveled; walking barefoot was hardly possible then.



With Agnes and children in her care, Roznov 1977

In 1978 I left Roznov and Agnes started to work in Prague and we sporadically met there. Later on she married an Italian and moved to Italy. A few years ago however, it came to my notice that she returned home to Hutisko. It was in 2007 only that I found myself in Roznov again; my former colleague, Pavel Onheiser, who became the General Manager of a branch factory, invited me for a visit. Naturally I used this opportunity to visit Agnes.

I went by bus to Hutisko and by coincidence I got a lift directly to Vasek's Farm. I found Agnes, her sister and husband, Mr. Ottolini, and also her mother. I used to know the latter as a woman of few words, caring only of cows; now she was cheerful and talkative. Agnes's father wasn't alive any more. Agnes showed me her pride – the chapel with a dormitory for believers who are coming for spiritual exercises. Mr & Mrs Ottolini also took 4 children – two boys and two girls in their care. We sang together and recalled old times. At parting I told Agnes: “It's like in heaven here”.

²¹ Anežka (Ágnes) Vašková

²² Soláň, U Vašků