



Boika Sokolova*

Remembering the Past, Creating the Present

Address given at the Brno Theatralia Conference, 7 June 2023

Dear Colleagues, Dear Friends,

Thank you for inviting me to say a few words at the end of this remarkable Shakespeare conference. I am honoured, and genuinely moved by the invitation. These have been two days of discussion and exchange, filled with the pleasure of being with friends. My colleague Kirilka Stavreva and I, are privileged to have had the opportunity to work with you and be part of this intellectual community. I would also like to thank the Visegrád Fund for supporting this important and timely border-crossing Shakespeare project.

Shakespeare's work is at the heart of our professional lives; it is part of our cultural milieu and is embedded in our educational curricula. The translations of his plays and poetry into the languages we speak, and the centuries-old tradition of showing them on our stages, are some of the strands in the complex processes of our nations' self-identification as European. For this particular project, we chose to trace the routes of Shakespeare transcreations at a particular moment in time, which we all recognised as a moment of shared experience. The diversity of the part of the world where we live inevitably calls us to revisit, remember and reassess history. As we speak, Russia wages a full-scale military aggression against its neighbour, sovereign Ukraine. This heinous act has provoked a powerful affective response to the needs of our Ukrainian colleagues and friends. At this moment of crisis, I would like to turn to the past, to acts of support and empathy, to the power of intellectuals to shape history. Our *lieux de mémoire* are rich in abrasive histories; today, however, I would like to remember generosity and idealism.

Standing here in Brno, I address you as a Bulgarian speaking in the Czech heartlands, and pay a tribute of memory to four Czech intellectuals urged

* University of Notre Dame (USA) in England. bsokolov@nd.edu



to affective, empathetic and constructive actions with long-term positive effect on Bulgaria.

During the first three decades after Bulgarian liberation from Ottoman rule in 1878, an extraordinary number of Czech intellectuals and professionals arrived in the country and actively participated in the processes of nation building. At this point, the Czech lands were still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but the spirit and struggles of the National Revival had already yielded fruit in the achievement of cultural autonomy. A highly educated Czech intellectual class had grown within the Austro-Hungarian imperial framework, while Bulgaria had acquired its political freedom from another empire and stood at the threshold of creating its modern self.

At this juncture, many Czechs came to work in the country and often stayed there for the rest of their lives. In true pioneering spirit, teachers, historians, artists, architects, musicians, jurists and businessmen engaged their professionalism in the creation of the institutions and industries of the young Bulgarian state. The revivalist ideas which had driven them, blended easily with Bulgarian revivalist aspirations, and provided much needed European expertise. What is extraordinary about these Bulgarian Czechs, (as they are collectively known), is how well they understood the damages caused by an alien imperial rule and how fruitfully they engaged in the transformation of the country they came to live in, by helping it grow into a modern nation.

Here I would like to pay tribute to some of them, each of whom, to my mind, realised on Bulgarian soil a central idea of the Czech Revival regarding the importance of education in the national language, the study of national history, and the promotion of national culture as pillars of identity. Shakespeare was also part of this legacy.

Thus, in 1879, a young historian, Konstantin Jireček (1854-1918), (later professor of History at Charles University and the University of Vienna, and future founder of Bohemian Balkan and Byzantine Studies), came to Bulgaria soon to become the first Minister of Education. As a student in Vienna, he had met Bulgarians who had risen to prominence after the liberation of the country and who had supported him in his work. Jireček honoured the trust placed in him by applying his knowledge and passion in building the new institutions of the state. He is widely recognised for putting Bulgarian education on a European footing, drafting essential rules for the teaching profession and devising curricula. He was instrumental in the revival of the Bulgarian Literary Society (out of which grew the Bulgarian Academy of Science), served as director of the National Library, extensively wrote about and popularised Bulgaria. His *History of the Bulgarians*, published in 1876 (in Czech and German) was the first book of Bulgarian history, based on modern research methodologies. It preserved its importance well down to the 1920 as “a book by which many generations of Bulgarians were brought up in love for their country” (Preface to the 1928 edition).

On Jireček's invitation, the brothers Karel Václav Škorpil (1859-1944) and Václav Hermenegild Škorpil (1958-1923) also arrived in Bulgaria in the 1880s. They worked as teachers of natural science and mathematics around the country. In their free time, the brothers, who had serious historical interests, travelled and conducted archaeological research. Unlike the imperial archaeologists who were at that time digging up Greece and Egypt, they did not take their finds to adorn an imperial museum. Instead, they preserved them in, and for, Bulgaria. Having settled in the city of Varna on the Black Sea, they founded the Varna Archaeological Society and the Varna Archaeological Museum, whose director Karel was for 30 years, until his death in 1944. In an act of gratitude and recognition for his contribution to Bulgarian archaeology and history, he was buried by the ruins of the first Bulgarian capital Pliska which he had excavated.

The Škorpil brothers, as well as Konstantin Jireček, are remembered with genuine popular appreciation. Their names are given to schools and inscribed in the forms of the Bulgarian landscape—two villages and a mountain peak in the Rila Mountain are named after Jireček. A village by the Black Sea, called Shkorpilovtsi, “remembers” Karel and Hermenegild, whose statues adorn the garden of the Varna Archaeological Museum. In the 2000s, Bulgarian Arctic expeditions gave their names to points in the Arctic—a Jireček promontory and a Škorpil Glacier now feature on the map of that continent.

Another Czech who left a mark is the actor and director Jozef Šmaha. He was invited to the helm of the National Theatre in Sofia in 1904, when the new theatre building—the second most impressive structure in the city of Sofia—was to be unveiled. Šmaha who had been involved in the establishment of the Prague National Theatre and was steeped in Revivalist ideas, was seen as the right person to rise to the occasion and create a repertory to match the highest standards. In his four seasons in Sofia, Šmaha oversaw the staging of more than thirty plays, and mounted three much-discussed Shakespeare productions—the first *King Lear* and *The Merchant of Venice*, with sets, wigs and properties brought from Prague, followed by *Julius Caesar*. On several occasions, Šmaha performed Lear and Shylock in Czech; he also trained major actors for the parts.

How do these histories speak to us today? To me, they show that in the convoluted strands of our long, multi-national, multi-lingual, post-imperial histories, there have been empathy, understanding and support. Among the ruinous events of time, the gracious acts of the Bulgarian Czechs are definitely worth remembering.

Tracing the Shakespearean strands of our shared history, as our current project does, allows us to cultivate the positive narratives for our professional *lieu de mémoire*. At a moment of aggressive re-drawing of frontiers, of fantastically re-written mythologised histories, of a war in which Ukraine is

fighting not only for its territorial survival but for its language, culture and identity, we recognise something familiar to all of us. On this critical cusp of their and our own history, the past tells us that we should stand by them, support their education, their scholarship, the retrieval of their historical narratives, their engagement with Shakespeare on their own terms. The work of the Czechs that came to Bulgaria in the 1880s shows how the seemingly invisible efforts of intellectuals can shape history.

In our conflicted, chequered, multi-lingual neck-of-the-woods, life has always had the potentiality of a Shakespearean plot. How we perform our part, will shape our common history and memory for decades to come.