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[Prague]



**Life Like a Swing:  
Women's Perspectives  
of Everyday Life in Czechoslovak  
Seafarers' Families  
Under State Socialism<sup>2</sup>**

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**Introduction: Traveling Men and Women Staying at Home**

Similarly as in other “socialist” countries, the freedom of traveling, going abroad, and returning home through strictly guarded borders was highly limited in Czechoslovakia before 1989. The crucial milestone in setting limits for free travel was the communist coup d’état in 1948, which “closed” the boundaries. In 1963, an important breakthrough towards liberalization in traveling occurred: “trouble-free” Czechoslovak citizens were allowed to travel to other socialist countries. It was also possible to travel to Western (capitalist) countries, but in the latter case, the conditions were much more restrictive. While the period of democratization in Czechoslovakia in the second half of the 1960s brought significantly greater freedom to travel, the time after the Warsaw Pact armies’ invasion of Czechoslovakia in August

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1968 was characterized by the imposition of new limits on traveling, especially to Western countries. The approval process for traveling to socialist countries was simplified in 1980; however, visiting Western/capitalist countries was still much more complicated. The abolition of all barriers to travel came just before the Velvet Revolution: in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall (9 November 1989), restrictions on movement across borders no longer made any sense.<sup>3</sup> The restrictions were an integral part of control over citizens; they limited access to information, knowledge about other people, other countries, and other (democratic) regimes. Yet, the reason for restrictions in movement was also practical: people who traveled abroad could emigrate. In a given historical context, emigration both undermined the authority of the regime and, in the case of the emigration of specialists, skilled workers, etc., their leaving the country incurred economic losses. Traveling was then limited not only by political ideology but also by economic considerations, mainly foreign currency shortages caused by economic inefficiency.<sup>4</sup>

For all these reasons, traveling was not a right but rather a privilege in Czechoslovakia during the period from the communist revolution in 1948 to the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Meanwhile, business trips abroad in a sense represented an even more luxurious form of travel. Besides visiting foreign countries (including Western ones), people working such jobs could obtain foreign currency and foreign goods; consequently, they reached a higher social status precisely because they had access to foreign commodities, representing luxury. Such goods distinguished them “at first sight” from “ordinary” (grey) people in socialist Czechoslovakia, especially in smaller towns, as reflected in some accounts. Even when a man traveled to other “socialist” states where the opportunities to buy desired or fashionable goods were limited, people could exchange foreign currency earned abroad for Tuzex<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on the topic see, for example: J. Rychlík, *Devizové přísliby a cestování do zahraničí v období normalizace*, Prague 2013.

<sup>4</sup> P. Mücke, *Šťastnou cestu...?! Proměny politik cestování a cestovního ruchu v Československu za časů studené války (1945–1989)*, Prague 2017, pp. 240–241.

<sup>5</sup> In Tuzex (TUZemský EXport = domestic export) shops, people could buy foreign, especially Western goods, but also some kinds of shortened and valuable home goods, such as Škoda cars in the 1980s. In Tuzex, people could only pay with vouchers (*bon*; plural: *bony*), which they got in exchange for foreign currency (exchange foreign currency for *bony* also represented opportunities for illicit trading); Czechoslovak

vouchers and buy Western (or “luxurious”) commodities in special shops in Czechoslovakia.<sup>6</sup>

Within the context of business trips abroad, this study does not concentrate on people who traveled for business but on their partners; i.e., mainly women, since in the majority of cases people working abroad were men. Women rarely got into these positions, either because of their gender roles, motherhood, childcare, or the fact that men were (and still are) perceived as the main breadwinners, or those who should have “preferential” access to more lucrative positions. Furthermore, they “naturally” do this work better because they are not burdened with motherhood, which is “natural” for women.<sup>7</sup> Using Sherry Beth Ortner’s concept as a theoretical background for the situation in labor market, the distribution of tasks and duties between women and men is based on gender inequality: in the bond between men and the world of work (culture) and women with family life (nature), nature is considered to be inferior to culture.<sup>8</sup>

On the one hand, the status of women in Czechoslovakia truly became modernized in the period of socialism, both in the private and public spheres. On the other hand, traditional gender roles in the family were maintained, among other aspects, through the omnipresent legal institution of the “mother” and horizontal gender segregation in education and

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crowns were not accepted in Tuzex. This way, foreign currency was siphoned from the population to the national economy. (For more information see, for example: A. Havlík, *Místo jedněmi zbožňované, jinými zatracované. Podnik zahraničního obchodu Tuzex a jeho působení v socialistickém Československu*, “Securitas Imperii,” vol. 34, no. 1, 2019, pp. 198–223.)

<sup>6</sup> A. Havlík, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Of course, there are some exceptions, such as nurses in developing countries; however, a reflection on this topic is outside the scope of the study. These restrictions also had a legal basis; for example, women’s work on vessels or in trucks was banned by the Labor Code, which prohibited women from working at night and working in continuous operation. (65/1965 Sb., Zákoník práce [Labour Code]: [http://aplikace.mvcr.cz/sbirka-zakonu/SearchResult.aspx?q=65/1965&typeLaw=zakon&what=Cis\\_lo\\_zakona\\_smlouvy; § 150 a 152](http://aplikace.mvcr.cz/sbirka-zakonu/SearchResult.aspx?q=65/1965&typeLaw=zakon&what=Cis_lo_zakona_smlouvy; § 150 a 152) (accessed: 25.06.2015). In foreign trade enterprises, the situation was different: women were not directly excluded from working abroad but by means of the staff selection process. Maternity and parental duties were perceived as an insurmountable obstacle for women to execute their jobs abroad without problems, without interruption etc.

<sup>8</sup> S.B. Ortner, *Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?*, in M.Z. Rosaldo, L. Lamphere (eds.), *Woman, Culture, and Society*, Stanford 1974, pp. 73–83.

paid work. The division into “female” and “male” represented an insurmountable obstacle to achieving equality, for example, in occupying (political) decision-making positions or in remuneration. The communist era was characterized by a significant disparity between the incomes of men and women. Socialist states had the opportunity to centrally decide on fair wages for men and women and to financially evaluate domestic work. Nevertheless, like capitalists, they calculated that the female workforce would accept lower wages because women did housework and raised children out of love, so they would not require remuneration for this work. As a result, housework was perceived by women themselves as the main reason for not being more productive, visible in society, and politically active. This can be described as a “vicious cycle”: women worked a second shift at home, while the labor market penalized them (as a group) for this fact, so women earned less money away from home than men and this was only logical, as they were the ones who compensated their low wages for housework and for staying at home with children, because losing their earnings would hurt the family less.<sup>9</sup>

The last statement was even truer in the families where men had the opportunity to travel abroad for business. Their wives and children could highly profit from their partners’ occupation and trips abroad: they got the exceptional goods mentioned earlier and, furthermore, in many of these occupations there were opportunities for family members to travel abroad with their partners as well. Reflecting the context of the guarded borders of socialist Czechoslovakia and economic shortages, it may have seemed desirable to be the wife or a child of a man working abroad. However, they spent more time “staying at home,” and they experienced not only benefits but also many problems as a result of being affected by the business trips of their family members.

At that time, everyday life in these families revealed similar basic characteristics of the life cycle experienced by people involved in economic migration today,<sup>10</sup> in particular with regards to consider jobs that require long absences from the family as described below. In this respect, the fact that

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<sup>9</sup> B. Havelková, *Genderová rovnost v období socialismu*, in M. Bobek, P. Molek, V. Šimíček (eds.), *Komunistické právo v Československu. Kapitoly z dějin bezpráví*, Brno 2009, pp. 201–204.

<sup>10</sup> A.K. Alamgir, *Labor and Labor Migration in State Socialism*, “Labor History,” vol. 59, no. 3, 2018, p. 272.

“migration decisions are not made by atomistic individuals but conditioned by membership within households and communities” is of great importance.<sup>11</sup> As for the impact on family life, there is “little evidence of the negative effects of mobility,” especially for “moving” people, or men in the case described in this paper. On the other hand, prospects of moving offer opportunities for fathers but pose challenges “for their spouses (especially spouses with their own careers) and children.”<sup>12</sup> However, there is one difference which is, in the context of socialist Czechoslovakia, a key variable: the opportunity for the family to travel with its husband or father for leisure, to experience movement beyond national borders, and maybe a sense of adventure.

A focus on the partners of people traveling for business brings an interesting perspective; it allows us to see the issue of traveling abroad and related benefits in the form of money, goods, traveling experiences, and adventure from two angles: 1) from the outside, by a partner who could travel; and 2) from the inside, by the spouse who had to stay at home in socialist Czechoslovakia with the family and experienced the “grey socialist reality” in her everyday life. At the same time, I will focus on the issue of gender relationships and dynamics because although the temporary absence of a partner in the family causes a sometimes fundamental change of roles it also influences dependency relationships in a couple with respect to finance, lifestyle, or the upbringing of children, for example.

This experience, however, largely depends on the type of business trip or more precisely the length of the stay abroad, the time when family members are separated. Observing various professions in which job descriptions included business trips abroad, I have identified three patterns: 1) short-term business trips of several days, including those of artists, athletes, scientists, businessmen, or specialists; 2) medium-term (up to three months) and also long-term (with an average length of nine months) periods of work abroad in the transport branch; and 3) long-term business trips or stays abroad lasting more than a year.

The first type of journey essentially did not affect family life similarly as the third one, which covers business trips or stays when a worker or expert

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<sup>11</sup> S.R. Curran, A.C. Saguy, *Migration and Cultural Change: A Role for Gender and Social Networks?*, “Journal of International Women’s Studies,” vol. 2, no. 3, 2001, p. 55.

<sup>12</sup> J. Hagan, R. Macmillan, B. Wheaton, *New Kid In Town: Social Capital and the Life Course Effects of Family Migration on Children*, “American Sociological Review,” vol. 61, 2018, pp. 370, 371.

stayed abroad together with his family.<sup>13</sup> The second category is the most important for the topic presented in this article because it includes the professions that most impact family life because of the relatively long periods when a partner was physically with the family and when he was not there. It is the case of the transportation industry – people working for airlines, or on railways, truck drivers, bargees, or seafarers – such workers and their families had to “switch” between two different lifestyles and family arrangements. With some simplification, it can be said that in the majority of those occupations the absence of a man or woman in a family was not long, at most a month.<sup>14</sup>

In comparison to the first group of people, the benefits to a family could be extensive, specifically the opportunity to travel abroad with the partner when fulfilling some conditions. For example, visits to Hamburg were a great attraction for bargee families. Pilots and flight attendants had even more opportunities to travel with family members because the company offered air tickets at a reduced price and was an opportunity for family members to use accommodation capacities reserved for crews that stayed abroad (India, the North African countries of Morocco or Egypt, and Singapore

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<sup>13</sup> In addition to other conditions (expertise and loyalty to the company or to the ruling regime and specialized training), there was a requirement that sales representatives and businessmen would be married before the departure. The first explanation of this condition results from gender stereotypes: a woman was to create a good background and working conditions for her husband. A more banal explanation can be offered here, one based on the physiological (sexual) needs of a man. A man, spending a long time abroad without a female partner, could try to satisfy his sexual needs in the place of his work. In this case, for example, an affair with another woman could cause several problems, including sexually transmitted diseases, infidelity, etc., with potential damage to the business, relationships in the community, or local residents. A highly reliable (though not perfect) solution to eliminate the aforementioned risks was a wife who would “watch” and take care of her husband in all respects.

<sup>14</sup> Aircraft crews had to make compulsory rest between the flights; thus, on some long-haul flights, the crew moved several times before returning to Prague and, as a result, stays in tropical areas extended up to three or four weeks. When flying by TU-104A and IL-18, the stays were even more frequent because more stopovers had to be made before reaching the final destination for a shorter flying range of the aircraft. Thus, the crews stayed in Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, Beirut, Cyprus, Dubai, Mumbai, Singapore, or Rabat. With the arrival of the IL-62 aircraft (flying range up to 8,000 km) residential locations in Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, Cairo, and Cyprus could be closed; J. Lehanka, *Na křídlech ČSA*, Prague 2015, p. 132.

were among the favorite destinations). This practice was not so widespread in the case of truck drivers since accommodation capacities were not provided in this profession and men generally slept in their trucks. Seafarers' families, however, had the greatest and most enticing opportunities to travel abroad, practically all over the world. This was a sort of compensation for a long time of separation from their family members.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, it was precisely these families who faced the most serious problems and negative consequences brought on by a man's (husband's or father's) job and his long absence from the family.

### **Seafarers' Family Life as a Research Topic: The Literature**

Although maritime transport was not a typical industry for landlocked Czechoslovakia, the example of this branch covers almost all dimensions of the researched topic: partnership and family life in families where one of the partners could travel abroad thanks to his profession. In addition, this frame offers an interesting comparative perspective with countries that do have an extensive maritime tradition. Poland is a good example here, because it was an important partner in the development of the Czechoslovak maritime transport.

In the context of the main research topic reflected here, I consider a comprehensive sociological study by Ludwik Janiszewski from 1976 to be very helpful and enriching.<sup>16</sup> He describes and analyzes in depth the conditions of work and the family life of seafarers and sea fishermen. Finally, the author introduces some measures for improving the seafarers' family lives, such as the installation of telephone lines, the improvement of social services, etc. This research is unique because of its scope: it is based on observation, the study of both official and personal documents, the undertaking of surveys, and, especially, interviews with 448 couples representing 224 seafarers' families plus 376 couples (188 families) of fishermen; eventually, 865 children of

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<sup>15</sup> In the first half of the 1970s, for example, seafarers were obliged to serve on a ship from nine to twelve months; this time could be even longer because of the second rule of disembarkation in Europe, if possible close to Czechoslovakia because of saving money for seafarers' transport from the port to Czechoslovakia (National Archives, fond ČNP, carton 15, Porady generálního ředitele, Materiál č. 39 pro ředitelskou poradou konanou 7. 3. 1977 [Material No. 39 for the management meeting held on 7 March 1977]).

<sup>16</sup> L. Janiszewski, *Rodzina marynarzy i rybaków morskich*, Warszawa–Poznań 1976.

seafarers and 412 children of fishermen were included in the project. The book thus provides reliable quantitative data on the issue of seafarers' family lives: loneliness, social isolation, a cyclic model of life, the deformation of family structures, problems with the upbringing children or the deprivation of sexual needs, and many others. Furthermore, I would like to mention Agnieszka Kołodziej-Durnaś, who follows a rich sociological research tradition in this area in the Polish context. She concentrates on seafarers and their psychical and emotional health, specifically "the issues of isolation which are the result of several months' long stays on vessels in the ocean."<sup>17</sup>

The topic of isolation was also studied by Birgit Larsen Jensen, who conducted qualitative interviews (with three seafarers and their wives) and using these narratives followed the main research question of how a seafarer is "affected by his isolated existence onboard a cargo ship."<sup>18</sup> Generally, separation from one's family was a stressful factor that negatively influenced his sea service. It is evident that the unique traits of a seafarer's work and the impact of the job on their personalities and mental (as well as physical) health is not solely studied by researchers from the former Eastern Bloc; it especially is an important topic in countries where the maritime profession has a long tradition and this transport sector represents an important part of the national economy. However, a lot of these studies are focused primarily on male seafarers and their difficulties. Even when family life is mentioned and the problems of seafarers' wives are reflected, they are not the primary concern.

This is not the case with the research by Jona M. Rosenfeld, Eliezer Rosenstein, and Marilyn Raab<sup>19</sup> from the 1970s (coincidentally, in the same decade as the work of Ludwik Janiszewski, which is quoted above). These authors prepared an extensive study built on interviews with ten seafarers' families while the fathers were at sea and with other women on board

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<sup>17</sup> A. Kołodziej-Durnaś, *Współcześni polscy marynarze – kręgi izolacji*, "Przegląd Zachodniopomorski," vol. 29, no. 4, 2014, p. 228. Another paper from the pre-1989 period also worth mentioning is a related study aiming at "the system of values" in studies of seafarers' families. See: A. Sosnowski, *Małżeństwo w systemie wartości rodzin marynarzy*, "Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny," vol. 49, no. 1, 1987, p. 265.

<sup>18</sup> B.L. Jensen, *The isolated seafarer*, 2002, pp. 1–31, <http://www.soemandskonerk.dk/billeder/the-isolated-seafarer.pdf> (accessed: 24.05.2019).

<sup>19</sup> J.M. Rosenfeld, E. Rosenstein, M. Raab, *Sailor Families: The Nature and Effects of One Kind of Father Absence*, "Child Welfare," vol. 52, no. 1, 1973, pp. 33–44.

who accompanied their husbands; the team also conducted interviews with eighty seafarers over the course of several journeys on five ships. The main conclusion of this work is that wives “strive hard for a way of life that will preserve a home feeling for themselves and their children, knowing that in the absence of a husband and father this depends largely on their own efforts.”<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the authors reflect in considerable detail on other problems related to partners and family life when a man serves as a seafarer, such as a woman’s bearing the burden of additional roles, her sole responsibility for children, or doubts about her husband’s fidelity. Male seafarers, on the other hand, have to cope with feelings of shame and guilt about the family (while they experience “considerable comfort and freedom from everyday worries” onboard).<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, Alice Snyder discusses the topic. Although her research focuses concentrates on submariners’ wives experiences, she offers interesting ideas about the conflicts and ambiguities of a woman’s role. The issue of the mother as a father surrogate is pointed out, as is the role of the wife in the man’s presence and absence as the person most affected by the cyclical work of a submariner.<sup>22</sup> Finally, I would like to mention a study by Thomas Heikell that deals with the impact of the seafarer’s absence from the family as seen from the son’s perspective.<sup>23</sup> This case study is built on family psychology, works with the family concept, and convincingly shows how profoundly the family, above all the children, can be affected not only by their fathers’ presence or absence in the family but also by the specifics of the seafarer’s work, which influences his character and behavior. This creates a unique (and not always positive) role model for the son.

All the above-mentioned works, however, focus on the issue of the profession as performed in a given period; they deal with the topic mainly from a sociological or psychological perspective, but are not historical studies.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 37–39. Similar conclusions, albeit not so extensive in a scope, offer: S. Nas, T. Yur, *A Qualitative Study on the Life Struggles of the Wives of the Seafarers*, “Journal of Maritime Research,” vol. 9, no. 2, 2012, pp. 7–12.

<sup>22</sup> A.I. Snyder, *The Effects of Husband’s At-Sea Time upon the Role Playing Behavior of the Submariner’s Wife*, “Anthropological Inquiry Services,” 15 September 1978, p. 12.

<sup>23</sup> T. Heikell, *Growing up in a Seafaring Family: Recollecting One’s Childhood with an Absent and Present Father*, “Roczniki Socjologii Morskiej/Annuals of Maritime Sociology,” vol. 29, 2010, pp. 59–71.

In this respect, I appreciate Hanna Hagmark-Cooper's unique book *To Be a Sailor's Wife*, in which the author presents the issue by reflecting on the experience of women from three age cohorts (the oldest were born between 1912 and 1935). Among other interesting topics, Hanna Hagmark-Cooper deals with the theme of "two parallel lives" of seafarers' wives – when a man was (is) at home and when he was (is) at sea.<sup>24</sup>

Naturally, Czech works on the issue are basically absent from the historiography, mainly because of the marginality of the topic. There exists a fairly large body of published memoirs of former seafarers, bargees, or pilots. But these works do not essentially reflect the issue of family life. They describe the profession itself and emphasize the uniqueness of the profession and the responsibility of such jobs as well as heroic and romantic elements.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, such jobs are highly masculine; the issue of family life is almost totally overcome. Therefore, I consider the task of reflecting on the lives of seafarers' wives and all the resulting difficulties, complexities, and benefits to be not only interesting but also important.

#### **The Position of Women in Socialist Czechoslovakia**

After the communist coup d'état in 1948, there were efforts to improve the status of women in the labor market in socialist Czechoslovakia; at least in theory, a commitment to equality was proclaimed and there was "enacted a constitution that guaranteed women equal rights in all areas of life." Accordingly, women's opportunities for higher education increased (for example, in 1945, there were 18.5 percent of full-time female university students; by 1975, this figure had risen to 41.0 percent). Similarly, a rapid increase in women's participation in the labor force is evident. In the 1970s, when the narrators were active in the labor market, 84.3 percent of all women of working age (15 to 54) were employed.<sup>26</sup> Women's participation in the labor market was essential for the functioning of many branches of the national economy because of the country's technological lag in many areas, which was compensated by human efforts.

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<sup>24</sup> H. Hagmark-Cooper, *To be a Sailor's Wife*, Cambridge 2012.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example: M. Krč, *O sobě a létání*, Cheb 2014; M. Kvapil, *Dálkovky. Zlatá éra ČSA*, Cheb 2012; J. Malý, *S kotvou na čepici*, Prague 2017; O. Preisler, *Konec námořníků v Čechách*, Prague 2017.

<sup>26</sup> S.L. Wolchik, *The Status of Women in a Socialist Order: Czechoslovakia, 1948–1978*, "Slavic Review," vol. 38, no. 4, 1979, pp. 583–602.

On the other hand, women were still concentrated in “traditionally” feminine branches (including those that were less paid: education, social services, service positions, unskilled manual jobs, administrative support, etc.), and they were largely excluded from decision-making roles. On top of this, women faced substantive gender inequality in the household, where the traditional hierarchical distribution of gender roles persisted.<sup>27</sup> In a socialist society, women were assigned to professions and functions that were not only different from those reserved for men but were also inferior to them.<sup>28</sup> Women were thus overworked, exhausted, and they carried the so-called double burden of paid employment and unpaid domestic work, including a great share of childcare (for example, according to data from the early 1960s, married men had on average four more hours a day of free time).<sup>29</sup> From the 1960s onwards, however, “the law increasingly concentrated on treating women differently, and on the protection and support of their motherhood”<sup>30</sup> (this was part of the state’s pro-natalist policies as well as general gender hierarchical order in the society).

As a result of postwar, post-February 1948 emancipation, some improvement and consolidation of the status of women in society were achieved. Since the mid-1960s, this agenda proved rather stagnant in terms of the share of women in paid work, education level, share in power, and the like. At the same time, the communist planners reassessed and mitigated some of their ideas about male and female equality; the reasons were twofold: 1) taking over the position held by a woman in a traditional unemancipated household by the state proved to be too costly, effectively impracticable, and not very welcome by the public; and 2) there was a real threat of a significant population decline.

For the interpretation of the first, “building” period of socialism, the key categories were the “emancipation” and “equalization” of women, while for

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<sup>27</sup> For a comparison and reflection on the situation within a wider context of former socialist states, see for example: J. Vullnetari, R. King, *Washing Men's Feet: Gender, Care and Migration in Albania during and after Communism*, “Gender, Place & Culture,” vol. 23, no. 2, 2016, pp. 198–215.

<sup>28</sup> É. Fodor, *Smiling Women and Fighting Men: The Gender of the Communist Subject in State Socialist Hungary*, “Gender and Society,” vol. 16, no. 2, 2002, p. 258.

<sup>29</sup> H. Scott, *The Awakening*, in H. Scott (eds.), *Does Socialism Liberate Women? Experiences from Eastern Europe*, Boston 1974, pp. 94–116.

<sup>30</sup> B. Havelková, *Gender Equality in Law: Uncovering the Legacies of Czech State Socialism*, Oxford–Portland 2017, p. 42.

the second (the period of so-called normalization after the Warsaw Pact invasion in 1968) there was a fundamental transformation of the “public and private sphere.” Many interpretations emphasize the roots of this transformation as dating back to the early days of socialism, when nationalization and women’s entry into paid work while maintaining their irreplaceable role in the home sphere together with the de facto liquidation of civil society dramatically changed the importance of the public and private spheres in people’s lives.<sup>31</sup>

The last stage of family life before the post-1989 transformation was again characterized by the repression of freedom (contrary to the process of democratization of the 1960s), which for many people caused the family to become a place of freedom as well as moral and civic values.<sup>32</sup> In many cases, this situation strengthened the position of women in the private family space and underlined their importance there. In seafarers’ families, however, this change occurred only marginally, if at all. In this family arrangement, the woman was an important figure mainly because she ensured the running of family life so that the man could be engaged in his profession. As a consequence, women are completely invisible in the history of the Czechoslovak ocean shipping, as if they did not exist.

### **Oral History Methodology: Uncovering “Hidden Stories”**

Using oral history methodology in this context has proved to be very valuable, since it offered women a space to express the issue from their perspective, point out what was important for them, and thus uncover new and unknown aspects of seafarer’s wives. The most suitable methodological approach is that of women’s oral history, with stress on the fact that women’s everyday lives are an integral part of history.<sup>33</sup> Such an approach uncovers important roles that (ordinary) women have played in history, ones that are quite often ignored by mainstream history.

This is more than true with regards to the history of Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping Ltd. On the one hand, men could hardly devote themselves to the seafarer’s profession without the support of their families, especially

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<sup>31</sup> I. Vodochodský, *Patriarchát na socialistický způsob: k genderovému řádu státního socialismu*, “Gender, rovné příležitosti, výzkum,” vol. 8, no. 2, 2007, p. 37.

<sup>32</sup> B. Havelková, *Genderová rovnost...*, p. 192.

<sup>33</sup> S. Gluck, *What’s So Special about Women? Women’s Oral History*, “Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies,” vol. 2, no. 2, 1977, p. 3.

their wives. On the other hand, women are the least visible group in the history of the maritime industry in Czechoslovakia. In fact, they are a totally invisible group: while men's experiences have been recorded in various memoirs,<sup>34</sup> those of women have so far been overlooked. As for a practical approach to the research, I proceeded from the basic division "of creating a new 'document' through the recorded interview into three types: topical, biographical, and autobiographical." Having in mind there is a "great deal of overlapping among the three forms," I concentrated on the autobiographical interview, where "the individual interviewee's life is what determines both the form and content of the oral history."<sup>35</sup> In this case, questions to reflect each individual's experience, partly overlapping with topic questions enabling comparison, were also prepared.

Despite my efforts to make women more visible in the history of the Czechoslovak maritime shipping, I have so far managed to only partially implement this intention, mainly due to problems related to the search for contacts with the wives of former seafarers and convincing them to participate and share their life stories. To contact these women, I used the snowball method, direct email contacting through shared directories of former seafarers and their relatives, and a paid advertisement in a regional newspaper. However, the return rate was minimal in all cases. Finally, only three women responded to these calls; the fourth woman's life story was recorded in the frame of the field practice realized by one student from the Oral History – Contemporary History Department (Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague). The fifth woman I met when recording an interview with a former seafarer. Even after a thorough presentation of the project and its expected benefits, other women did not agree to give an account. They decided on this approach especially because their memories of life and marriage to seafarers were often very painful, so they did not want to remember this part of their lives. A secondary variable in the decision-making process played on women's sense of the "insignificance" of their own persons compared to the male seafarers who worked hard, made

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<sup>34</sup> For example: A. Fojtů, *Moře milované, moře proklínané... Vzpomínky jednoho z prvních poválečných kapitánů Československé námořní plavby*, Prague 2006; O. Mlejnek, *Dálná plavba volá*, Prague 2006; F. Ptáček, *Modré medailonky*, Prague 2009; M. Svoreň, *Slaný chléb: Odysea socialistického námořníka*, Prague 2013; J. Michal, *Jak jsem se stal námořníkem*, Prague 2017; V. Boura, *Moře je láska, moře je život*, Prague 2018.

<sup>35</sup> S. Gluck, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

journeys all around the world, and provided for their families' material security. Women became "accustomed" to being insignificant because they "just took care" of the household. This is another form of underestimating the family sphere in society, and women are perceived to be closely linked to this sphere.

This "insignificance" of a Czechoslovak seafarer's wife in a given context becomes even clearer when I offer a comparison with the experiences of seafarer's wives from the Åland Islands; i.e., with women who lived in a different political and geographical context. The problems (mainly in everyday life, family relationships, etc.) the Åland women have to cope with are similar to those of seafarer's wives' in the former Czechoslovakia. The main difference here is that while women in landlocked socialist Czechoslovakia felt themselves to be more exceptional (interesting and in a sense attractive) in comparison with other women, the Åland Islands seafarers' wives feel more independent than other women whose male partners work ashore:

[In that context], the seafarer's wife is often presented as a female ideal and there are a lot of stories that strengthen the image of the strong and enduring woman, who despite very harsh conditions manages to create a home for herself, her children and her roving husband. [...] The iconic status of the seafarer's wife is so engrained in the common psyche of the island, that it makes it difficult to accept that in real life not every seafarer's wife can or wants to live up to it.<sup>36</sup>

As a result, women from the Åland Islands who live by the sea, in a country where the sea is of strong symbolic value, the Ålanders are more aware of their irreplaceable role in virtually the whole community, even though gender stereotypes often persist in their life stories and experiences and their status derives from being "one's wife."<sup>37</sup> The everyday reality of these women as well as freedom in the country has led to their higher self-esteem and a more profound sense of their strength as women. That is also the reason why Hanna Hagmark-Cooper was highly successful in contacting seafarers' wives for her research.

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<sup>36</sup> H. Hagmark-Cooper, *Being an Icon: The Perception of the Seafarer's Wife as a National Character*, in *IOHA Conference Collection: The Many Voices of Oral History*, pp. 205–214, <http://www.ub.edu/historiaoral.barcelona2014/actas/index.html> (accessed: 20.09.2019).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

Concerning the argument about the women's "insignificance," the seafarers' wives I interviewed can be divided into two groups: women who stressed their husbands' professional lives and achievements, mainly the wives of higher officers and captains, and women who focused the narrative on their own lives. Perhaps the most similar aspect of their lives is that they married relatively early and had two or three children, which corresponds to the demographic response of women of that time to the state pro-population policy. Finally, their marriages to seafarers and participation in some voyages on ship with their husbands are, of course, central to their common characteristics. They differ in their professional lives, long-term development of partnerships with seafarer-husbands, or the course of their lives after 1989. The short women's biographies that follow at least partially explain all these unique and individual aspects and stages of women's lives

*Alena* was born in Prague in 1944; she graduated from a technical high school in 1964 and started to work as an assistant in a constructor's office in the engineering complex ČKD in Prague. She got married in 1967 (her wedding had to be postponed because her seafarer bridegroom missed the first term because of his ship's late arrival in Europe). In 1969, she gave birth to a daughter and a second daughter was born three years later.<sup>38</sup> Alena was a housewife with children for ten years. In 1980, she again started to work in ČKD in a similar position and worked there until her retirement. In 1987, she divorced her seafarer husband and then moved in with her colleague who has since died. Today, she lives with her family.

*Dana* was born in south Bohemia in 1946; she got married at the age of twenty (1966). She graduated from nursing school (1964) and worked as a pediatric nurse throughout her active working life (except during maternity leave). She has two sons, one born in 1966 and the other in 1970. She is still very active, interested in computer games as well as in ceramics, and takes care of her husband and family.

*Hana* was born in Prague in 1939. She got married in 1958 and was widowed in 1984. She is the mother of three children: two daughters (born in 1963 and 1965, respectively) and one son (b. 1967). She graduated from a higher pedagogic school (1950) and began to teach at a primary school.

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<sup>38</sup> I do not use children's names in describing women's stories because the narrators themselves did not use them. I could name them differently to keep anonymity, but I prefer to keep the style of the women's accounts.

She left this career when her first child was born and became fully devoted to looking after her family. After the Velvet Revolution (as a widow) she started her own successful business as a tour organizer and a tour guide.

*Květa* was born in Prague in 1936. In the early 1960s, she graduated from the technical university in Prague (she would have preferred to graduate in the humanities, but because of her “bourgeois origin” she was not admitted to this type of study by the communist authorities). She is very proud of her intellect. During her study at university, she got married and then gave birth to three children (her daughters were born in 1963 and 1965 and her son was born in 1967). She worked in several technical positions; however, her career advancement was dependent on her husband’s job. She often took part in ship journeys, either with her children or alone. She lives with her husband in Prague.

*Lída* was born in 1947 in the Giant Mountains. She graduated from nursing school. Several days before taking her final exams at the age of eighteen, she gave birth to her first son (and got married); her second son was born in 1970. In the late 1970s, she divorced and remarried a seafarer. This life change also meant the need to move from the south of Bohemia to Prague, where her second husband lived. Here she worked as a nurse in a hospital for almost thirty years and then as a nurse in a smaller cardiology clinic; she still works part-time there.

Having a partly limited sample of female narrators, I also used interviews with seventeen men-seafarers recorded in 2010 as a secondary source for the interpretation of the research topics. Sixteen narrators were from the Czech Republic and one was from Slovakia. The oldest one was eighty-one at the time of the interview, and the youngest was forty-six years old. Seafarers of all levels of the ship’s hierarchy were represented in the sample (captains, senior officers, junior officers, standing officers, cadets, crewmen) as well as all ship professions (seafarers from the deck, engine, and economic/hotel departments, and ship doctors; I could not manage to record an interview with a radio officer). Three of the seventeen narrators continue to work on ships with foreign ship owners. None is married to any of my women narrators.

In men’s narratives, the topic of family life was not a central one; instead, it was omitted or even ignored. Oral history interpretation, however, offers a great opportunity to interpret “empty spaces” in the interview with “frail but precious tools: attention to language and form, to how things are remembered, or forgotten; and not only to the contents of memory, but also

to what is not remembered, to silences.”<sup>39</sup> I will present the most important moments from the lives of seafarers’ families and how they are embedded in women’s and partially in men’s accounts in the second part of this paper. I will start with a substantial benefit of this work, family travel on a cargo ship, and proceed to the topic of the different lifestyles of family members depending on whether the man was at home or onboard somewhere in the world. Thus the presented work takes the form of a case study in its scope, without the possibility of an extended generalization. On the other hand, a detailed thematic analysis<sup>40</sup> of the five interviews has shown repetitive patterns of behavior, actions, experiences, and emotions; as a result, a substantial theoretical saturation<sup>41</sup> of the sample has been proved. Therefore, the presented conclusions convincingly reflect many characteristics of business trips experienced by those “who stayed at home” – partners and children – in a given historical context.

### **The Seafarer’s Family on a Voyage**

Working for the Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping Company, which until 1989 was owned by the state via a “virtual” joint stock company, offered a chance to travel abroad, if only for several hundred men. One of the significant benefits of this form of employment was the opportunity to go abroad not only for seafarers but also for members of their nuclear families (wives and children under fifteen or eighteen).<sup>42</sup> The company introduced this measure as a stabilizing factor because seafarers very often left the company for family reasons, for the difficulties associated with a long separation of man from his family. For a wife and children, traveling on a ship was allowed only if the seafarer had been in service for at least five years, including gap months, exactly the time when many of the seafarers left the company.<sup>43</sup> At the beginning of the 1970s, the “waiting period” was shortened to three years.

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<sup>39</sup> L. Passerini, *Introduction*, in L. Passerini (eds.), *Memory and Totalitarianism: International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories – Volume 1*, Oxford 1992, p. 15.

<sup>40</sup> For this type of thematic analysis, see, for example: A. Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, Oxford 2012, pp. 578–580.

<sup>41</sup> For the topic of theoretical saturation, see, for example: D. Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research, A Practical Handbook*, Thousand Oaks 2010, p. 409.

<sup>42</sup> The conditions for the age of children traveling on ships changed several times.

<sup>43</sup> National Archives, fond ČNP, carton 1, Porady generálního ředitele, Materiál pro ředitelskou poradou konanou 21. 1. 1965 [Material for the management meeting held on 21 January 1965].

Even when it was stipulated that both a woman and a child had to pay a daily allowance fee and to cover travel costs to the ship and back home,<sup>44</sup> this benefit was extensively used. In 1981, for example, seventy-five women and seventy-three children were on a voyage, and 175 women and eighty-five children visited ships for a short-term stay in a port, usually when the ship was anchored in another communist country close to Czechoslovakia.<sup>45</sup> For the families, it was an opportunity to spend some time together. In the given context of women's everyday life in socialist Czechoslovakia, the seafarers' wives could take a break from ordinary duties. On the other hand, such stays or visits of women on board could even intensify and deepen their subordinate position in the relationship (which I describe later in the text).

Despite the limited travel opportunities of those times, the wives did not emphasize the benefit to travel and see foreign countries. Of great importance here is the fact that at the moment when travel and free movement is allowed, albeit limited as in this case, people focus more on experiences. Thus, for example, seafarers' wives did not particularly stress that they could look at the "West," the least accessible part of the world because of restrictions under state socialism; some of them did not even mention this. Visits to capitalist countries were interesting for them but not as exceptional, for example, as diving in the Red Sea,<sup>46</sup> which is described by the chief cook's wife Lída in her reminiscence of one of her first voyages on the ship:

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<sup>44</sup> From the 1970s, the wife paid twenty-four and children paid twelve crowns per day (older children paid twenty-four crowns per day). Then, for example, a rough calculation of one return trip to Cuba for the wife and two children up to fifteen years of age, was as follows: at a rate of twenty crowns per day for an adult and twelve crowns per day for a child, this totals 3,360 crowns, basically a seafarer's monthly salary; L. Krátká, *A History of the Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping Company, 1948–1989*, Stuttgart 2015, pp. 188–189.

<sup>45</sup> National Archives, fond ČNP, carton 1, Porady generálního ředitele, Materiál č. 6 pro ředitelskou poradu konanou 6. 2. 1981 [Material no. 6 for the management meeting held on 6 February 1981].

<sup>46</sup> This was also influenced by the fact that Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping voyages were directed more frequently to communist countries and especially to the developed countries, in accordance with the territorial structure of Czechoslovak foreign trade. And the stays in the West were much shorter because of the high efficiency of loading and unloading (as opposed, for example, to weeks spent in Cuba or India); the financial aspect also played a role, i.e., Czechoslovak seafarers' relatively low salaries compared to the prices of goods and services in capitalist countries.

For example, seafarers organized a trip in Sudan; lifeboats were taken and we went to the Red Sea. We looked at the coral, the seashells; the sea there is completely blue. And the boys, my sons were fishing for corals, watching fish. It was an exotic experience and I really enjoyed it.<sup>47</sup>

Among the accounts focused on traveling and exploring new countries, visits to Cuba are often mentioned, as it was a common destination of Czechoslovak ships, mainly in the 1960s and 1970s. Seafarers and their families loved this country because of the beauty of landscape and beaches. One captain's wife mentions several such trips:

I've been to Cuba about three times. I have never seen more beautiful beaches and unspoiled environments anywhere else. [...] I have very nice memories of that. We fished for shells, spent time on wild beaches, and it was really beautiful.<sup>48</sup>

However, the stays of wives and children onboard could also pose problems. For example, small children could disturb seafarers when they needed to rest and sleep during the day after a night shift. It should also be mentioned that although they were well equipped, the cargo ships where the families stayed in the 1970s and 1980s offered almost no space or opportunities for leisure activities, for the active spending of free time, or any place where children could be safe and play. Then, it depended on the mothers to ensure that the children on the ship would disturb the men at work as little as possible. Being on the ship could be also very boring for the wife, since she had no duties there except to take care of children and, when a journey interfered with the school year, teach them. Not only boredom but also almost total dependence on the husband could cause the partners problems during the voyage. This dependence was based primarily on the fact that the woman, being on the ship, did not have any of her own money because taking money from the home was generally

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with Lída (chief cook's wife) recorded by Veronika Kubátová, Prague, 30 May 2017, Faculty of Humanities, Charles University.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Dana (captain's wife) recorded by Lenka Krátká, Prague, 19 April 2017, Institute of Contemporary History, Czech Academy of Sciences (later OHC).

prohibited, as Czechoslovak citizens were not allowed to own foreign currency; thus, she could spend only the money that her husband received for his work on the ship.<sup>49</sup>

During the interviews, the women did not complain about this situation; they did not even mention this sort of dependency as if it was something “natural.” They appreciated the chance to go abroad and have new, interesting, extraordinary experiences mainly in comparison with other “normal” women – and men – in Czechoslovakia. They were “in the shadow” of their husbands-seafarers; they were the “second sex” – to quote Simone de Beauvoir – but in the given political and social context, they were exceptional. And this sense of exceptionality persists in their accounts. That is why they did not stress problems in the accounts and did not highlight problems, unless they were off the record.

On the other hand, some women loved to be on board, as they made use of relative comfort and the interest of other men, understandable in this environment, especially during long voyages.<sup>50</sup> This experience, however, can be presented only through men-seafarers’ accounts, one of which is quoted here (the reminiscence of a seafarer from the deck department):

I remember one wife who fell for another man. Finally, she moved to the other seafarer’s cabin. There were struggles among the men; the two seafarers picked a fight. [...] He was an unhappy guy; he was a bit of a laughingstock to others. You know, it was a bit shameful. He invited his wife for half a year for a voyage on the ship, and his wife lived somewhere else. He invited her for someone else. Well, it was an affair. I think that nobody but the woman was guilty.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The basic seafarer’s salary was paid through a bank account in Czechoslovakia; abroad, seafarers could draw a certain limited amount in foreign currency that covered their spending in that country.

<sup>50</sup> Despite the stereotype of “a woman in every port,” forming relationships with women was somewhat complicated for seafarers, if only for long journeys at sea and the lack of money in capitalist countries. On the other hand, in poorer countries they could afford to make contact with a girl or woman and they often made use of that opportunity.

<sup>51</sup> OHC, Interview with J.J. (A/B sailor) recorded by Lenka Krátká, Liberec, 13 April 2010.

It is interesting to note in this account that the whole guilt is both implicitly (she fell for another man; they did not fall in love) and explicitly at the end of the statement attributed to the woman. It is not surprising that even though such affairs did not take place often or regularly, they reinforced the seafarers in the belief that “woman does not belong on the ship,” most often in the sense that “my own wife does not belong there.” The main reason for this conviction, however, was not primarily fear of a partner’s infidelity. Rather, it was the fear of shame, ridicule, undermining of authority, and even a questioning of masculinity, which is essentially important in this milieu.

In fact, for other seafarers the presence of a wife on the ship meant the disturbance of habits, increased financial costs, and the limitation of freedom while being in a port, especially on long journeys. In extreme cases, the presence of a woman on board complicated the operation and management of the ship. The following case was so serious that it was also recorded in the State Security’s file (the record was probably prepared with the cooperation of a secret collaborator on the crew):

Captain K.Z. was in similar situation. His wife was a citizen of the U.S.S.R. and she used to meddle in his steering and commanding so badly that he was dismissed from his position five years ago, and they let him back to sea only after he promised that he would not take her on board. Z. is one of those women who are boasting in the society by the status of her husband.<sup>52</sup>

In addition, these family voyages offered otherwise inaccessible exotic experiences, as mentioned above. Thus even today, several decades later, women do not emphasize the negatives of these stays, and in fact they often avoid mentioning them. And men, seafarers, emphasize a compensatory character of the journeys that could or even should be perceived as a “reward” for their family for their long-term absence and the related practical problems of family life.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> State Security Archives, Prague, volume 4147, Personal characteristics of the captain Z., 22 September 1989. Some of the direct quotations from interviews are used stated here as they were translated for the book: L. Krátká, *op. cit.*

<sup>53</sup> This compensatory character appears in a different light through the experiences and memories of those children from the seafarers’ families who stayed at home with their closest relatives (most often grandparents) and only their mothers left for the ship

Concerning the topic, oral history interviews also revealed one rather surprising practice related to the traveling of women on the ship: the practice of women staying there only with a husband and without children. I do not mean a couple of days long stays but voyages that lasted several months, when children stayed at home, separated from their parents and looked after by their relatives. These relatives were typically grandparents; according to gender stereotypes (and gender hierarchy), a grandmother's figure was the most essential in this case. In this context, words of gratitude not to their mothers but in some cases to mothers-in-law as well were recorded in women's accounts. For example, one captain's wife remembered very emotionally her mother-in-law with whom she shared her maternal duties:

Never in my life have I seen such a wonderful woman as my mother-in-law. She was quite ordinary; her parents didn't provide her with any education, and she was an excellent cook. I didn't learn how to cook from my mathematician mother, but I learned everything from my mother-in-law. And then, when my children were born, she was amazing, too. She did the babysitting instead of me, maybe for two months; one daughter was one year old and another was three years old. I was with my husband in England where the ship *Vítkovice* was built; my husband was the main construction supervisor there. So I lived with him for two months in England and she took care of the two children.<sup>54</sup>

In principle, the reason for women's traveling alone was pragmatic: children were too small to be allowed to travel. This benefit was provided for children older than three years, or "too old," and a trip was not compatible with their school attendance, vocational training, etc. Of course, if children stayed in Czechoslovakia, it could also be easier for a woman to get permission to leave the country – this measurement for preventing emigration was also applied to other groups of citizens. In such cases, a woman on board became a "professional wife" without duties but depending on her husband, without her income.

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to participate in a voyage together with her husband-seafarer. At the moment, I do not have enough data for a deeper reflection on the issue, which would certainly bring a different perspective on gender hierarchy, family relations, and a challenge for the topic of pros and cons of business traveling under state socialism.

<sup>54</sup> OHA, Interview with Květa (captain's wife) recorded by Lenka Krátká, Prague, 8 April 2017.

No doubts about the decision to “leave the child” at home – for example, with relatives, friends, colleagues, or even the woman herself – and go abroad were expressed in the accounts. Moreover, the extraordinary opportunity to travel in conjunction with the exoticism of a trip on a ship at sea – which, in landlocked Czechoslovakia, was even less achievable than traveling to the “West” – was the answer to any possible questions and doubts. In the strongly masculine maritime environment, however, one more reason for such a journey of a married couple can be identified: the desire of the husband-seafarer, stemming from his sense of loneliness; the need to have close loved ones with him, and if not the whole family, at least the wife. In this context, Hana, a captain’s wife, remembered a Christmas she spent with her husband but without children:

Once at Christmas, the ship arrived in Liverpool and I received a letter from my husband asking if I would come to him. The eldest daughter was nineteen, my younger daughter was seventeen, and my son was sixteen. They studied at high school; they couldn’t come with me. Everyone took it differently. One child said: ‘Just go, mum, at least you can bring new jeans.’ The second one said: ‘Sure, you must follow father as always, especially when he writes about it.’ And the third, I don’t know. They had a reasonable attitude to the situation, to this style of life.<sup>55</sup>

At the end of this account, the woman adds: “I don’t think they blame me for that. I’ve never asked them.”<sup>56</sup> In fact, the same mechanism of remembering as in the case of men-seafarers is evident: the avoidance of unpleasant memories and the displacement of the thought that children may not have been as happy as the woman thought they were and wanted them to be. From the point of view of gender hierarchy, what reflects women’s experience is an interesting moment that women did not basically encounter criticism for “abandoning their children” for some time, behavior that was “natural” to male seafarers, understood as necessary when a man works and provide his family with money, foreign goods, and travel experiences. The contemporary context of state socialism and the inland position of Czechoslovakia here also offer a “justification” for women and their absence from

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<sup>55</sup> OHA, Interview with Hana (captain’s wife) recorded by Lenka Krátká, Prague, 9 April 2017.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*.

the family. On the ship, however, they remained dependent on the man, thus occupying the bottom of the ship's hierarchy. Their dependence on the man, however, was also transmitted to the "mainland" to a great extent, thus influencing family life offshore.

### **When the Woman Was at Home and the Man Was at Sea**

Concerning the topic of family life, I asked questions related to the "everyday life" of seafarers' wives: work duties, taking care of children, home care, contacts with friends or family members, hobbies, etc. It is not surprising that the rhythm of their lives was significantly different when the seafarer was on duty, absent from the family for at least six to nine months, and when he was at home.

During both these periods, women and families as a whole faced serious difficulties. The women I spoke with talked about these problems quite openly. Then, on record, they presented this part of their lives rather positively; making note of problems was an exceptional moment in the interviews. The women wanted me to preserve them for "history" as strong, reliable women who were able to manage everything because it was "needed." Furthermore, complaints are not in conformity with this desired self-presentation, as if they wanted to balance their "insignificance" – their sense of insignificance – in comparison to a seafarer with his demanding, dangerous, and adventurous job this way.

Since the husbands were traveling "all around the world," they were much more closely tied to the sphere of the family than other women, though they were employed and otherwise participated in public life, the sphere that is fundamentally underestimated. Thus they emphasized how excellently they had fulfilled this role. It should be also taken into account that it was almost impossible for such a woman to build her own professional career, either because of limited opportunities within the centrally planned economy or because of her irreplaceability in homecare duties, her being the seafarer's wife.

What was women's life like when they were young, living during the period of state socialism with various limits on traveling, career building, consumption, etc.? As already mentioned, there were specific and significant differences in the seafarers' wives' life when the man was or was not at home. The latter situation and, in a sense, the first half of the family life was similar, with some sort of simplification, to that of a divorced woman with children. Still, the seafarer's wife was more emotionally tied to the man (she was married, she was in love), so at some moments her loneliness could be experienced more deeply than by a "single mother." For example,

even today the captain's wife Dana expresses these feelings with great sadness and emotions:

In Cuba, my husband would go to the post office in Havana to call me a lot. Because of the time zone difference, he woke me up; he called, for example, at two in the morning. When we finished, I would say: 'Oh, I did not say this to him, and that's what I wanted to ask, and I did not ask again.' You know, it was terrible. Or I went somewhere in the evening once in a while, my mother took care of the children, and he would just call. Then I always cried so much because I missed the call. And that was terrible.<sup>57</sup>

The bitterest memories of women are connected with the Christmas season. Because of this, for example, one of the women still "hates" Christmas time today and almost every woman today says: "The worst moments for me were at Christmas." This is understandable because the very essence of this time is closely tied with family, with an omnipresent picture of a "happy family Christmas" presented by the media and TV programs, and for these women also by experiences of their female colleagues, friends, and relatives who lived a "normal" life.

But the seafarers' wives had to cope with various problems every day, from the most mundane, such as a broken switch, to the most serious ones as abortion or the death of parents. One of the seafarers remembered listening to two seafarer's wives who were talking about these problems:

He does not know what it means to take care of the home. He does not know about the broken washing machine; he does not know the problems I'm having, he has no idea. I will write him in a letter: 'The children are ill, they have fevers, and the washing machine is broken down.' But when he gets the letter, two months will have passed, the kids are healthy, and the washing machine is fixed. [...] This is what one wife of an electrician would say. [...] It's partly true. Unfortunately, she should have expected that. It's seafarer's job.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> OHC, Interview with Dana (captain's wife) recorded by Lenka Krátká, Prague, 19 April 2017.

<sup>58</sup> OHC, Interview with J.J. (A/B sailor) recorded by Lenka Krátká, Liberec, 13 April 2010.

A brief analysis of the following seafarer's statement offers even better insight into the topic of coping with difficulties in family life: "She lived that out in pain, but we came through; last year we had our thirty-first wedding anniversary."<sup>59</sup> Note how the singular and plural are used in the excerpt from the interview with a former seafarer: *she* is the one who "lived out in pain," but *we* "came through." Such a formulation is in conformity with the first quoted opinion: a woman simply had to accept the unique characteristics of life with a seafarer and all the difficulties involved; it was her "destiny." Her activity was not expected; her automatic connection with the sphere of the family was anticipated, which is not appreciated because it is "natural." Then, when everything was managed well, family life was satisfactory and the marriage had not broken up, despite the difficult conditions that arose from the husband's profession for the lives of the spouses. This "success" is automatically attributed also to the partner, or, rather, the partner attributes it to himself. In this way, he diminishes the role of his wife in achieving a happy family life, when family and home were, as they remember, of extreme importance for seafarers.

At this point, I feel it is important to mention men's accounts about the life of the family during their absence from home. When I asked open questions about the narrator's marriage and the birth of his children, I got only short answers that tended to marginalize the role of the family in a successful maritime career.<sup>60</sup> So I went on asking the narrators questions directly aimed at the wife's life in his absence: how they managed the duties of both parents, how they felt to be alone, and so on. At this point I expected the men would reflect on how many difficulties a wife experienced when being alone for half a year, burdened with the role of mother and father, a paid job, or other duties. In this case, however, men tended to avoid an answer. The first, very common specific feature of the narratives was an almost total avoidance of the question. For example, I asked: "What about your wife at the times when you were at the sea and she had to manage everything alone?" The answer was: "Then we navigated the ship to Cuba." The man

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<sup>59</sup> OHC, Interview with M.B. (chief engineer) recorded by Lenka Krátká, Liberec, 26 May 2010.

<sup>60</sup> For more information, see, for example: L. Krátká, *Ženská na loď nepatří. Dimenze gender ve vzpomínkách bývalých československých námořníků*, in B. Knotková-Čapková (eds.), *Mezi obzory. Gender v interdisciplinární perspektivě*, Prague 2011, pp. 21–42.

was not somewhat deaf or distracted; he simply did not want to answer the question. Or, rather, he did not want to remember this part of family life. In a minority of cases, I got an answer, but it was very brief and contained some rationalizing strategies: "Everything was needed for money, of course, so that at least I brought home a little more money than it was normal, so that we could afford a little more and then we could afford to build a house."<sup>61</sup>

The interpretation is that the seafarers were well aware of the problems the woman or children could have, or of the sadness they could feel when the father-seafarer was not at home. But at that time these men gave preference to their work, to the love of the sea, in a sense, over family life. Today, they realize, some of them only unconsciously, that they did not care enough about their families. Often, the more neglectful fathers they were in the past, the better grandfathers they are today. The seafarer's role of a grandfather is a topic that does not exist in the literature mentioned in the first part of the text; perhaps this is because such studies lack a historical perspective, and thus they cannot reflect the whole life story of (former) seafarers. Contrary to this, the topic of problems and difficulties the job brought to men were mapped to a considerable extent. Consequently, I mention the most widespread troubles in the next section.

### **When the Seafarer Father Came Home**

When the seafarer came home for a few months, a lot of things tended to have changed in family life. At such times, not all was "at once rosy;" on the contrary, new problems would arise. The man, husband and father, was on holiday, but his wife and children had to fulfill their everyday duties. Many seafarers tried to get some voluntary work; however, this was not easy and not supported by the employer. Thus many seafarers experienced two different types of loneliness: at sea, they missed their families, and when they stayed at home they missed the sea and their work. Some of them resorted to alcohol to deal with these emotional and mental pressures.

During her husband's holiday spent at home, the wife suddenly had to "switch over" from her independence to a certain degree of dependence, although she had been accustomed to handling all her duties when at home

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<sup>61</sup> OHC, Interview with M.B. (chief engineer) recorded by Lenka Krátká, Liberec, 26 May 2010.

alone. It was essential not only to keep peace in family life, but mainly to boost her husband's self-esteem and status. The seafarer's profession is perceived as strongly masculine and an independent woman was often undesirable for this (self) image. However, precisely such a woman was needed to keep the family together during the man's absence. Czech and Slovak seafarers' wives managed to cope with the situation, sometimes at the expense of a certain trick that they are proud of today, as for example, Dana, a captain's wife:

The upbringing of children was the worst, because the kids were used to some stereotype we had in the family and to the usual habits. Now suddenly someone who has the same opportunity and the same rights to raise these children comes. And he imagines he has sailors in front of him and that he will be in command. And I said to my husband: 'You cannot restrict the kids so much, you have to adapt to us.' [...] Sometimes, when I could not push something through, to buy a new cupboard, for example, I thought: 'Well, I will wait six weeks and then I will buy it.'<sup>62</sup>

In other words, this cyclical rhythm of life can be depicted as a movement "from independence to dependence and back," because two imaginary life cycles can be tracked. In the first one, the woman had to manage everything herself<sup>63</sup> and on top of that to give her seafarer partner a sense of certainty and safety that everything was fine at home, that the children were well, and that they were well looked after<sup>64</sup> so that he, at sea and far from home, facing danger, and doing hard work, was emotionally comforted. Within the "second" life cycle, when it did not change so much in the family life from the practical point of view, she had to "enter" the role of a "traditional woman" to create a good family environment, with the man as the "head of the family," again to support his self-esteem.

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<sup>62</sup> OHC, Interview with Dana (captain's wife) recorded by Lenka Krátká, Prague, 19 April 2017.

<sup>63</sup> In some life stories, a moment of strong female friendship was accentuated; this topic is out of the scope of the paper.

<sup>64</sup> "She lived that out perfectly, she brought the boys up well, they are both university graduates, she took care of them"; OHC, Interview with M.B. (chief engineer) recorded by Lenka Krátká, Liberec, 26 May 2010.

In fact, the context of socialist Czechoslovakia, with its economic scarcity and limits on traveling abroad, was brought to its own advantage, when the problems and difficulties that largely women endured were rationalized by material values and by money and such goods as Western cosmetics, clothes, and electronics, all the commodities that were scarce in Czechoslovakia or of poor quality and unfashionable; at times even a plastic bag with a picture from a Western shop was considered to be a valuable fashion accessory. Apart from the goods, the seafarer's job enabled the family members to go abroad to places that were inaccessible for the majority of "ordinary" people in Czechoslovakia.

### **Concluding Remarks: The Seafarer as Hero and His "Invisible" Wife**

The exceptional situation of seafarers' wives in Czechoslovakia led them to depreciate their role in the couple, perceiving themselves as the other, often uninteresting persons. Up to now, they had the idea that a man, a husband was the "hero," and what's more, provided the family with material benefit, while she was doing only what "was needed." On the one hand, the seafarers' wives from Czechoslovakia followed the pattern of "maritime culture" with all the pros and cons, unique traits and difficulties of that lifestyle, including that of a swing as mentioned in the title. But this "swing" did not move only within the dimensions of "at sea"/"on land," "home"/"abroad," or "with the husband"/"without him," but also within the dimension of dependence and independence. Dependence on the man was increased by the contemporary context, the fact that the seafarer's job brought something extraordinary for the whole family. Because of this, it was the woman's task to do everything for the family to function smoothly, even if it meant dependency or the sidelining of their professional interests or ideas of life.

With the women's accounts I have at my disposal, I cannot clearly answer the question of whether male seafarers were aware that without their wives they would not have been able to pursue the profession they really loved. But only women's work and efforts and their decision to accept the way of life with a seafarer allowed men to experience parenting, a sense of generativity, and, at the same time, to stay at the sea. The outcomes of the interviews suggest that men perceive these facts rather unconsciously and often try to avoid them. The context of socialist Czechoslovakia allowed them to be heroes: not only because they succeeded in the maritime business, even though Czechoslovakia was a landlocked country, but also because they could provide their families with goods and traveling almost

unavailable for the most of the population. Men and women who are in a way connected with the Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping Company still try to maintain and reproduce this tradition and reputation of shipping; women do so often at the cost of suppressing their own feelings and emotions.

Women, men, and children who formed the seafarers' families are those persons who used the benefits of father's job during the state socialism period. In this article, I have mainly discussed the situation of women and their efforts to switch between life "with a partner" and "without him," overcoming all the difficulties and sometimes using also the benefits of traveling or shopping abroad. The problems facing male seafarers as hard work, isolation, or deprivation among others were compensated by the fact that these men perceived and experienced their work as a sort of addiction, as expressed in the accounts; they loved the job and were willing to give a lot for it.<sup>65</sup> As a result, the lives of children in seafarers' families were highly dependent on their mother's everyday work and their strength to cope with this "special" way of life. These children are well aware of the work of mothers, but the seafarer father is the most admired figure in the family, overshadowing the mother. In children's memoirs, for example, intensively put out through social networks, the simple fact of being "on the ship" and "at the sea," so exceptional for people in a landlocked country, resonates. The uniqueness of the seafarer's profession in the context of former Czechoslovakia, together with side-lining the gender and women's rights issues in the communist era, inevitably caused women to accept the role of "the others," less interesting and less important persons than the seafarers. Perhaps that is why so few women want to remember the time when they could visit exotic countries often in exchange for losing a piece of themselves.

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<sup>65</sup> The interviews were conducted only with those men who worked "on board" many years, almost their whole active life. Experiences of men leaving the company after one journey or within a few months were not covered within the project; here, a new dimension for research is offered.

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Denying free travel abroad and back to one's homeland represented an integral part of the communist regime's authoritarian control and thus was one of the main characteristics of everyday life in socialist Czechoslovakia. In this context, people who were allowed to travel abroad because of their job were in a privileged position, as were their families to some extent. Paper concentrates on the experiences of people who "stayed at home": the partners and children of workers who were able to travel and work abroad. The seafarers' families are used as an illustrative example for analysis because their arrangement gives the best idea of all the pros and cons of traveling abroad and its impact on family life. The conclusions of the analysis and interpretation of interviews with seafarers' wives show a strong reproduction of gender stereotypes in these families. This fact is questioned very little by both men and women (if at all), because in the context of socialist Czechoslovakia the seafarer's profession provided these families with a specific sort of luxury and uniqueness, bringing them considerable benefits that distinguished these people from the majority of the population.

Keywords: **business trip, Czechoslovakia, family, state socialism, seafarer**

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