

I am sitting in an almost empty pub, thinking about life. Actually, I have been going to pubs my whole long life. It started in my childhood, when I used to go to the cottage with my parents on Sundays. And on the way back, after exhausting work in the garden, they would have a beer or two at the U Smolíků restaurant at the Klánovice train station. I didn't enjoy it there very much and wanted to go home. So, to keep me quiet, they would order me lemonade and sometimes chocolate. Sometimes even cheese and salami. Well, today that probably wouldn't be anything special, and pubs probably don't even serve that combination anymore, but in the post-war period it was something.

And my first beer in a pub! It was an experience I still remember today. I was about fifteen at the time, and my cousin, who was a year older, and I went to visit our uncle at work. He was a stoker at Madeta in Tábor. It was snack time, around ten in the morning, and right across from the factory was a classic pub that was just opening. When we walked in, it was like a fairy tale to me. A large empty room, no one else there but us, clean tablecloths on the tables, which, it seemed to me, smelled wonderful, as did the fresh, soft rolls lying in baskets on all the tables. Then my uncle ordered tripe soup, which also smelled wonderful. Although I don't have a particularly keen sense of smell, at that moment I could smell a mixture of three aromas that did not overpower each other, as if a woman had put on three different perfumes, but rather complemented each other, creating what is often referred to today as a synergy.

The tripe soup lived up to its aroma and tasted really good. And with it, a properly chilled and frosty beer. The pub was still empty, probably because everyone was working hard, so we could talk about life in peace. Since then, I have liked empty pubs where no one disturbs you and where you can meditate in peace; perhaps Catholics do something similar in an empty church. On the other hand, pubs where strangers sit down next to you and constantly talk to you, or where there is a queue of people waiting for you to pay so they can sit down, are not for me.

Similarly, I remember, when I was a little older, how another uncle of mine, who was also my godfather, celebrated a milestone birthday in a restaurant. When everyone was leaving, he looked at me and said, "Come on, let's have some Georgian cognac together." How could you not love godfathers like that! Just to remind you, today this cognac is probably hard to find, but in the days of socialism it was not such an unusual and expensive drink. If you ask young

people in our atheist country today who a godfather is, they will probably answer that it is the boss of the mafia or some other criminal group. Older people or Catholics will know that it is a person who participates in baptism and, according to traditional concepts, takes on certain obligations towards the child and his or her family. For example, that they will take care of the child if they lose their parents, help with their upbringing, be their friend, and advise them. However, such godparenthood has gradually become more or less formal, because in the event of the loss of parents, care is already provided to a certain extent by the state. Nevertheless, I think it's good to have a godfather, and not just so that they pay for a drink.

It is interesting that men remember such events for the rest of their lives, while they usually quickly forget most of the gifts they receive. It is probably different for women. Why do they remember such things? Who knows. Perhaps because it was unusual, surprising, maybe even a little shocking, and it was the first time!

In a pub, you learn things you wouldn't learn elsewhere; people confide in you things they wouldn't otherwise confide in anyone. In the days before the internet, craftsmen would gather there; later, when people started doing business and many didn't have offices, deals were made and contracts were signed there.

Cafés had a slightly different function, serving as a kind of internet server, because all domestic and some foreign newspapers were available there. My father was a great lover of cafés, but I didn't inherit that from him; cafés never grew on me. Probably because I prefer draft beer to coffee. These days, I try to enjoy it because this may be one of my last visits to a pub. I have diabetes, trouble walking, prostate problems, my liver can't take much more, and most of my friends can only meditate in heaven. Today, there are also many foreign restaurants here, where the food may be good, but they usually don't know how to pour beer properly and don't even have the right tap.

Well, I've experienced a lot in my long life in pubs, different prices, different foods, different opinions and attitudes. The lives of many people may sometimes seem completely unbelievable and incomprehensible to us, but that is only when we look at them from a distance without knowing the context and apparent details. But when we get to know them better, suddenly everything can seem understandable and believable.

But let's start from the beginning, for example with my favorite card game, Mariáš.

Mariáš is a game that is almost unknown today, but a few years ago, when there was no television or internet, it was the main activity for many men in the evenings. It was a short game that required a little thought, but not too much, and was played for money, but not too much. And, of course, people drank while playing, sometimes heavily, because for every renonc (for those unfamiliar with the term, it means playing a card against the rules), everyone had to pay for a shot, and the longer the game went on, the more renonc there were, and thus the more shots. In the past, liquor was relatively cheap, so it wasn't difficult to comply with this rule. However, with today's prices of hard alcohol, this could in some cases represent a significant drain on the family budget.

And what was important was that the game was played in a pub. For many men, a pub is something like a hospital where they can recover very quickly, or a church where they can strengthen themselves mentally. They escape from the daily cycle of duties and various tasks. They get rid of stress, complain, discuss their troubles and loves. They clear their heads of pressures and bad feelings. They recharge and regain the energy that everyday stress takes away. And some are convinced that drinking enough fluids will flush a lot of negativity out of their bodies and give them new strength. Women will probably never understand this, as they generally consider the time men spend there to be completely wasted, time that could be spent on far more useful things.

In my opinion, there are roughly two types of men who go to the pub. One of them lives alone at home, has no one to talk to, so he goes there to talk, likes to sit down with someone, preferably someone who is also alone, and doesn't shut up. The other lives in a household full of people and goes there for silence, choosing an empty table and trying either to meditate in peace or, on the contrary, not to think about anything at all. It's a disaster when these two types meet, then it's a massacre. They also go at different times of the day. For example, men who are already retired and whose wives are still working like to visit these establishments in the morning so that the alcohol can wear off and they can be good husbands at home in the evening.

In the past, playing Mariáš was also a step towards a certain social recognition; for example, playing it with a priest or a large landowner used to mean

something in the village hierarchy. Many longed for it and usually strove for it in vain.

Later, for example, the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and President of the Republic, Antonín Novotný, was a great Mariáš player. It was said that during his reign, an important criterion of real influence was whether or not someone belonged to the close-knit group that played Mariáš with him. In front of his vacation home stood a huge brewery barrel with a chair and table inside. And it was there that he played the game with his friends on Sundays. The regional party secretary who played there could sometimes have far greater influence than, say, a higher-ranking secretary of the Central Committee who did not play there. Even some seemingly ordinary and insignificant party apparatchiks who played there could gain considerable influence. Novotný himself was said to have been very accommodating towards them. The fact was that within the party apparatus itself, the formal hierarchy of individuals was by no means always decisive. It was said of some comrades that when you talked to them, it was like talking in Moscow. Knowing who they were was considered more important for practical party life than having a doctorate from the College of Political Science.