

## **“Our Attempt is to go Deep to the Society and Understand the Generation Problem, the Gender Problem, etc.”: An Interview with Miroslav Vaněk**

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Mirek Vaněk in Guadalajara

One of the Czech oral history movement’s three main aims, in the words of one of its foremost practitioners, Miroslav Vaněk, is to “focus on the people who are on the edge of society.” He admits that after 1989, they first concentrated on interviewing “the big politicians.” Since then, however, it has become increasingly important to interview the general population in order to create a more complex picture of Czech history: “There are some general views that our society was black and white, that we were without life, but it is not true!” At the beginning of the 1990s, Czech historians focused either on communists or on dissidents, “but they forgot the ordinary people.

So, our attempt is to go deep to the society and understand the generation problem, the gender problem, etc.”

Miroslav Vaněk came to oral history with the help of Václav Havel, who was intrigued by Vaněk’s interest in oral sources. In 1992, shortly after Havel had left office as president of Czechoslovakia, he sent Vaněk interview transcripts for his book on the Velvet Revolution and later invited him to become researcher at the Institute for Contemporary History (ICH) in Prague. Eventually, Vaněk interviewed Havel. Since then, Mirek Vaněk has become a driving force behind the development of oral history in the Czech Republic.

Dr. Vaněk has been the director of the Oral History Centre at the ICH of the Academy of Sciences in Prague, Czech Republic (<http://www.coh.usd.cas.cz>) since 2000. With his colleagues, he has undertaken a vigorous program of publishing books about oral history methodology and history books based on oral

histories (see [http://www.coh.usd.cas.cz/pages\\_en/publications.htm](http://www.coh.usd.cas.cz/pages_en/publications.htm)). In 2006, he founded the Czech Oral History Association (<http://www.oralhistory.cz>) and developed plans to host the International Oral History Conference in Prague, Czech Republic, in 2010.

For more information about Mirek, visit his website at [http://www.coh.usd.cas.cz/pages\\_en/biography\\_miroslav\\_vanek.htm](http://www.coh.usd.cas.cz/pages_en/biography_miroslav_vanek.htm).

The interview was conducted on September 26, 2008, during the 15<sup>th</sup> International Oral History Conference in Guadalajara, Mexico, at the main library of the University of Guadalajara's University Centre for the Social Sciences and Humanities - one of the quietest places we could find on the campus (you would not believe it from the background noise despite the use of a clip-on microphone).

Listen to Mirek Vaněk talk about his personal involvement with oral history, the history of oral history in the CSSR under communism, the development of oral history in the Czech Republic since the "Velvet Revolution" of 1989, and expectations for future developments. The interview is 28 minutes long, the mp3-sound file is 10.8 MB big.

You may also wish to read Vaněk's paper or listen to his presentation of the paper at the International Oral History Conference in Mexico. Both files may be downloaded from *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 28 (2008).

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