



Don Sparling

True Brno patriot

Don Sparling, originally from Ottawa in Canada, has been living and working in the Czech Republic since 1969. Yes, 1969. After an initial visit in 1968, he decided to come here to live and work as a teacher of English. After a short stay in Brno he moved to Prague, but soon came back to Brno in 1977, where he has stayed ever since. Besides teaching and managing the international department at the university, his career in Brno has involved lots of arts and drama, he even acted in the seminal Czech film, *Setkání v červenci* (1978). Where in Brno managed to catch up with him for a short interview.

Where in Brno: What is your job?

DS: At the moment, nothing – I'm retired. I used to teach in the Department of English and American Studies of Masaryk University (1977–2000), and then for nine years (2000–2009) I was Director of MU's Office for International Studies (the university's international office). However, in retirement I keep busy with all sorts of projects. Probably the main one now is the Brno Expat Centre, where I was the founding Manager and am now Lead Consultant. We're funded by the City of Brno and a number of the leading international companies in Brno; our purpose is to provide skilled foreign professionals and their families who live and work in Brno or plan to do so with free consultation and assistance.

WIB: When did you first move to Brno and why?

DS: March 1969, to teach English at the State Language School. My intention then was to remain for the rest of that school year and the 1969–1970 school year, and then return to Canada.

WIB: Why did you end up staying?

DS: In 1970 I moved to Prague, and was there, teaching and translating, till I returned to Brno in 1977 to teach at Masaryk University (then Univerzita Jana Evangelista Purkyně). In the meantime I had married a woman from Brno, so that – and a growing dissatisfaction with Prague – led me back to the city. I loved, and still love,

Brno – a rich cultural life and vibrant cultural scene, a fascinating history, interesting and active people, beautiful surroundings that are easy to get to, etc. etc.

WIB: What was it like when you first moved here?

DS: Well, people were still coming to terms with the invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops, so the mood was at times somber and even quite depressed. And in fact a number of people I met when I first came here were no longer here in the fall of 1969 – they had emigrated over the summer, which turned out to be the last time until 1990 people could travel abroad with no problems. But then in the seventies people began to deal with the situation by engaging in private activities, many of them very creative, with their families and friends. These activities were very satisfying, and often amazing.

WIB: What would you say are the biggest changes you've seen over the years?

DS: Oof! Well, of course with the collapse of Communism the city could emerge from the restrictions it faced during the Communist years, in particular the fact that ultimately everything was decided by the Party in Prague, so there was no real decision-making here. Rather paradoxically, this meant that people in Brno in the Communist years got used to having to do things themselves, and I think this helps explain why Brno has been so successful since 1989 in basically reinventing itself as a 21st century city, a major educational centre, an R & D and IT hub, a place where innovation and innovative ideas are welcome and fostered, and so on. This has been mirrored in the change in the visible face of the city – people sometimes forget how utterly grey it was back in the Communist era, the buildings unpainted and with flaking stucco, Spilberk closed because of lack of investment and the park around it an overgrown wilderness, etc. etc. Now, visually, it is a beautiful city, with a wealth of fascinating buildings and well-thought-out public spaces and witty monuments (the most recent being the wonderful "giraffe"). (By the way, that Brno is an attractive city is something



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that most Brno people, held in thrall to the myth of Prague, do not realize and will not admit. But it is enough to show any foreigner around Brno to see its truth.) And they forget how closed off it was from the world; people look at me in disbelief when I inform them that during the Communist years there was a grand total of five native speakers of English in Brno.

WIB: What are some of the challenges that Brno faces if it is to become a truly international 21st century city?

DS: I think the essential challenge is to convince all its citizens that it can and should be such a city, and to explain to them what this entails. I still hear people saying things like "Why do we need all these foreigners here?", "Why are we spending our money on things like the Janacek cultural centre?" and things like that. But Brno has always been most dynamic when it was most open to the outside world, and in the 21st century this also means providing a rich range of cultural opportunities for the "creative class" that is driving so much of change at the present moment.