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# Indians of Bohemia: the spell of woodcraft on Czech society 1912-2006

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## Indians of Bohemia: The Spell of Woodcraft on Czech Society 1912-2006<sup>2</sup>

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**Sport-Ethnie-Nation: Zur Geschichte und Soziologie des Sports in Nationalitätenkonflikten und bei Minoritäten.**  
Baltamannsweiler: Schneider Verlag Hohengehren, pp. 112-130.

### Introduction

Unsuspecting foreign summertime travellers visiting more scenic parts of the Czech countryside might be taken aback by frequent sights of teepee cones. They might be similarly perplexed, when visiting a newsagent, by a front cover of a children's magazine adorned by pictures of teepees, totem poles and headdresses. Our travellers might also, if they are lucky, as this is a rarer sight than the first two, stumble across a spectacle of what appears to be a 1880s camp of a prairie Indian tribe busily preparing food and tools. Equally, if not more confusing might be a TV show based on the competition in starting fire by rubbing a piece of wood against a bow.

Domestically, journalists (e.g. Zachovalová 2005; Feřtek 2006) and academics (e.g. Librová 1994, 2003) alike have been trying to get to grips with the phenomenon of voluntary simplicity, the associated belief of significant sections of the Czechs population in education-induced lifestyle changes as a way of addressing environmental problems and the predilection of Czech environmentalists for combining hard manual work with games and campfire bonhomie (Librová 1986; Hanuš/Jirásek 1996).

A person at least cursorily acquainted with the history of 20th century outdoor movements might get a whiff of understanding by a glimpse of a mainstream bookshop shop-window well stocked with Czech translations of 100 years old books on North American wilderness by E.T. Seton,<sup>3</sup> an author who in his native (British) and adopted (Canadian and US) homelands passed into obscurity shortly after his death in 1946 (Morris 1970; Anderson 1985).

In the remainder of this paper, I will aim to cast more light on these bewildering phenomena. My argument is that first, these and many other

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2 This research was supported by the Geography Discipline of the Open University.

3 A Prague-based publishing house Leprez has recently set out to publish the complete works of E.T. Seton in Czech. Between 1997 and 2004 eleven out of the planned 14 books were published.

features that have characterized the Czech society for most of the 20th century amount to a distinctive cultural formation whose roots can be traced to an early 20th century radical child-centred educational system – woodcraft. Second, referring to the contemporary manifestations of woodcraft legacy in the Czech society, I will contest the notion of woodcraft as a ‘failed movement’ (Morris 1970, 194), and at the same time endorse Anderson’s (Anderson 1985, 48) assumption that many present-day environmentalists are followers of woodcraft ideas.

I will proceed in the following steps. First, I will outline the origins of the woodcraft movement developed by E.T. Seton as a blend of the educational programme informed by the Enlightenment-related theory of recapitulation and the late 19th century US woodcraft as a set of skills for survival in wilderness. Seton’s original contribution was to combine these two strands and to relate them to the rituals and the character of the Indian as a role model. Second, I will highlight the lasting ideational legacy of Miloš Seifert who was responsible for the early import and adaptation of woodcraft to the conditions of the interwar Czechoslovakia. Third, I will explain the causes behind the expansion of the initially marginal social movement to a mass cultural phenomenon already before WWII, which, in turn, was the key factor in its survival throughout the inhospitable years of state socialism. Fourth, I will briefly sketch out the ways in which the movement negotiated this legacy in the radically altered post-1989 environment and highlight the character of the movement in a broader sense as a blend of pre-WWII concepts and principles enmeshed with the experience gathered during the years of state socialism. Finally, drawing on these insights, I shall emphasise that during its century long history the Czech woodcraft, by staying true to its core principles, has always posed a challenge to the dominant worldview of the day.

## **E.T. Seton and the Intellectual Origins of the Woodcraft Movement**

What set Seton apart from other progressive educational reformist of the late 19th and early 20th century was the central place of the Indian as the physical embodiment of a spiritual union between man and his (sic) environment (Anderson 1985, 45). Seton’s educational approach developed gradually as a consequence of Seton’s diverse interests and experiences accumulated over the previous nearly four decades of his life. Born in South Shields in England in 1860, Seton’s family moved to Canada when he was five. Already in his boyhood, he became acquainted with James Fenimore Cooper’s noble savage (Andersen 1985, 45). Rebelling against strict Presbyterian authoritarianism with which his father brought him up, young Seton sought escape in solitary walks in woods and in summertime campouts with friends in the Ontario backwoods where he learnt Indian skills of tracking and survival in wilderness. There he also came to admire the loving manner in which most Indian parents reared and treated their children.

Thus, he rejected harsh discipline in favour of fairness, gentle guidance and peer group pressure as a means of correction (Andersen 1985, 43).

Seton's growing interest in Indian history and folklore was also a result of his friendship with the Canadian Indian poetess Pauline Johnson who he first met in Toronto in 1893 during the exhibition of the painting of wolves completed during his arts studies in France. In later years, his interest in Indian affairs, their culture and skills, but also their plight in hands of US federal bureaucracy, developed further. In the final years of the 19th century, he visited several Indian reserves and saw the injustices suffered by their inhabitants which made him an outspoken champion of the Indians' cause for the rest of his life.

Seton was alarmed by changes which the American society was undergoing in the late 19th century and by what he perceived as the ensuing erosion of American virtues such as physical courage, personal honour, independence of spirit and personal self-reliance. He had a dislike for urban life, industrial technology and the associated loss of handicraft skills and practical knowledge (Andersen 1985, 44; Turner 2002, 465). To him, the depravity of the modern American life contrasted with the noble life of Indians before the arrival of the whites. He saw the latter as the 'Indian's burden and believed that the true American should do away with the pioneer model, adopt the best things of the best Indians and come to the realization that those live longest who live nearest to the ground....who live the simple life of primitive times' (Andersen 1985, 44). Thus, Seton's response to America's social ills was the return of the young to the outdoors and restoring through nature in the wild the old personal self-reliance and independence (Andersen 1985, 44).

However, the influences forming his woodcraft educational system were not confined to the ideal of the Indian. Apart from the standard romantic conventions of the time as set forth by Rousseau, Longfellow and Thoreau (Anderson 1985, 45), Seton also maintained interest in utopian socialism which he developed during his study of painting in Paris (1890-1892). While constructing his educational scheme, he drew on an earlier US recreation activity and ethic called woodcraft. The first manual titled Woodcraft by George Washington Sears was published in 1891. These manuals celebrated woodsman's working knowledge of nature and an independent masculine individual rooted in the frontier and exhibited misgivings for the abundance of consume goods available to the outdoorsman (Turner 2002, 464).

Like many other educators at the turn of the century, Seton embraced the theory of recapitulation championed by a US psychologist G. Stanley Hall, the author of Adolescence published in 1904. Hall's ideas on recapitulation had its precursors in Rousseau's books Discourse on Inequality and Emile where the life of a child was divided into distinct periods, each of which corresponded with the stages of man's (sic) evolution, the young child being

deemed to be at the stage of the savage (Edgell 1992, 43).<sup>4</sup> The phases of human progress showed themselves as primitive inborn instincts in children. Seton studied human instincts – hero worship, play, the love of glory and gang instinct - and took them into consideration when gathering ideas for the woodcraft movement (Morris 1970, 189).

As Morris (Morris 1970, 189) points out, some of these ideas – the investiture ceremony, the secret signs, the patrol totems - found their way into the scout movement started in England at an experimental camp on Brownsea Island by Robert Baden-Powell in summer 1907. However, Seton's first camp had taken place already during the Easter break of 1902. Following acts of vandalism committed by some local boys on his Wyndygoul estate at Cos Cob, Connecticut, instead of reporting them to the police, he invited 42 boys to his estate where they swam in the lake and in the evening gathered around the council fire to listen to Seton's talk on the ideals that the Indians upheld (Anderson 1985, 45). Shortly afterwards in May 1902, upon the invitation of the editor of Ladies' Home Journal (with the circulation of 800,000 copies; Kožíšek/Barber 1995), Seton began to publish a regular 'boy's department'. Seton himself regarded the seven-part series of his column in the magazine to be the first edition of what became the book *The Birch Bark Roll* in 1906. In 1903 he published in the same magazine a serial that was the first version of his most famous autobiographical book *Two Little Savages*. By the end of the same year, about 60 tribes of Seton Indians sprang up throughout the US. A highly decentralised organization called the League of Seton Indians was established to meet the demands of this growth (Andersen 1985 47).

From the outset, the activities of Seton Indians were marked by their strong environmental ethos. Seton preached against wasteful use of natural resources, even in building fires. When his New York friends from Camp Fire Club – many of whom scientists – were invited to teach the boys participating in the 1904 camp, the rules prohibited killing any animal except for scientific purpose and notebooks were preferable to specimens in accumulating knowledge of the natural world (Andersen 1985, 47). Similar ideas were formulated as guiding principles of the woodcraft movement in *The Birch Bark Roll*: 'the promotion of interest in out-of-door life and woodcraft, the preservation of wildlife and landscape and the promotion of good fellowship among its members' (Morris 1970, 187).

However, at around the same time, an import from England - the more regimented and centralized boy scouting - began gaining in popularity in the US. In an attempt to give the new movement a more American flavour and basically seeing it as an extension of his own Woodcraft Indian scheme, Seton incorporated his organization in scouting and he himself was elected its Chief Scout in 1910. Nevertheless, Seton quickly found himself in a minority in the leadership of Boy Scouts of America (BSA), which was firmly built on the Baden-Powell's model. He protested that the interest in flowers,

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4 The idea behind recapitulation was best summarized by Ernest Haeckel's famous phrase: 'Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny' (Edgell 1992, 43).

wildlife and woodcraft had given way to patriotism and drill instruction. The conflict deepened when WWI broke out and boy scouts organizations both in Europe and in the US were made part of their countries' war efforts. Seton, who was not a US citizen, regarded this intrusion of the nationalist element as something alien to an international movement, one that he described as the 'Junior Peace League of the World' (Morris 1970, 187).

The rift between Seton and the rest of the BSA leadership grew so wide that he ceased to be the Chief Scout in 1915, left the Executive Board of the BSA and went on to establish, during 1916-1917, the Woodcraft League of America. It had initially met with an enthusiastic response and maintained a healthy membership throughout the 1920s. In years before WWII, the League still had 13,000 members. However, it began to disintegrate shortly after Seton's death in 1946 and was dissolved in 1953.<sup>5</sup>

## The Czech Woodcraft 1912-1948: An Anti-Establishment Movement

### The Historical Context

The Czech woodcraft as an outdoor activity had its precursor in Klub českých turistů (Czech Hiking Club; KČT) which was inspired by and was a response to German hiking tradition. However, despite its ostensible concern with outdoor and sporting activities, KČT was an integral part of the wider Czech national project.<sup>6</sup> Symptomatically, the representative publication commemorating the 50th anniversary of KČT traces the idea of the Club to the fiercely nationalist Czech institution called the National Union for Northern Bohemia in whose Prague office KČT had its first headquarters. The motive for the establishment of the Czech national hiking organization was twofold. First, to strengthen the stream of Czech ethnic visitors to ethnically mixed regions (with German speaking population) with the view of providing the moral and economic support to Czech communities and of building 'outposts' in the form of pensions, view towers and the like. Second, to represent the Czech nation abroad and to strengthen relations with Slavic countries (Brož 1938a, 32; Mareš 1938, 30).<sup>7</sup>

By the time of the arrival of woodcraft and scouting in the Czech Lands in the early 1910s, the Czech national emancipation had been achieved and the

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5 The only group that survived the disbandment of the WLA was its loosely associated western section in California called Woodcraft Rangers. It has maintained its activities, although considerably modified, to date (Kožíšek, 1995). For details on the history of woodcraft movement in the UK see Morris (1970), Prynne (1983), Edgell (1992) and Parsel (2004).

6 'For a small nation, so exposed to a powerful neighbour and suppressed by all possible means, as ours, it was inevitable that even tourism, which is supposed to provide an individual with inner delight, put itself right from the beginning in service of national interests' (Nigrin 1938, 24).

7 In 1925, KČT founded the Association of Slavic Tourist Cooperatives with members from Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Poland and Czechoslovakia (Brož 1938b, 50).

need for movements propping up Czech nationalism somewhat diminished. The establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918 with Czechs as the dominant nation created a space for alternative strategies. Woodcraft and scouting were prime examples of the shift of the focus of some sections of the Czech society away from the domestic national competition with the German community and towards the adoption of a wider international outlook. As Pecha (Pecha 1995, 144) pointed out, in the post-WWI Europe, woodcraft's Indianism was an articulation of a non-nationalist, cosmopolitan orientation. The popularity of the US as a supporter of the newly independent Czechoslovakia (e.g. 62 YMCA secretaries sent to Czechoslovakia in 1920 [Hanuš 1996]) is likely to have played a role in the enthusiastic reception of woodcraft and scouting. It has to be stressed, though, that the founders of the Czech scouting and woodcraft went to great lengths to give these movements a Slavic and Czech flavour, which was most vividly manifested in choosing the Czech word *junák* (*lad*) as a substitute for 'scout' and in translating 'woodcraft' as *lesní moudrost* (literally sylvan wisdom).

In some sense replicating US developments, the origins of woodcraft in the Czech Lands were intertwined with the emergence of scouting. Prior to 1911, when a high school PE teacher A.B. Svojsík, upon his return from a study trip to England, founded the first groups of scouts in the Czech Lands, Seton was known only as an author of short stories on North American wilderness (published in Czech in 1909 [Hanzík 1995]). Svojsík introduced Seton's ideas to Czech scouting already in his 1912 book *Základy junáctví* (Foundations of Scouting) in which he laid the ground for the thesis, since then widely accepted in the Czech scouting literature, on the role of Seton in founding the scout movement equal (if not more important) to that of Baden-Powell and on the division of labour between the two: '...romance, poeticity and love for nature [in scouting] are to be credited to Seton while order, discipline and organization are Baden-Powell's achievements' (Svojsík in Hanzík 1995, 50). Later on, in the post-WWI period, in all his writings Svojsík, as the Chief Scout of the Union of Czechoslovak Scouts, continued to credit Seton for his contribution to scouting.

### **The Origins of Czechoslovak Woodcraft**

A young high school teacher of biology Miloš Seifert obtained Seton's *Birch Bark Roll* and *Two Little Savages* in 1913 and already that summer organized for his students a camp inspired by Seton Indians. The first teepee in the Czech Lands was pitched at their campsite. To some of the early Czech scout leaders, including Svojsík himself, the American version of scouting, at that point still strongly influenced by Seton, was more appealing than the British scouting, which they perceived as excessively militaristic, regimented and patriotic. The extent to which the experience of WWI which broke out shortly after the arrival of woodcraft and scouting ideas in the Czech Lands, exacerbated these resentments against the British scouting can only be surmised today. It would appear likely, though, that in the Czech

society, with its recently achieved national emancipation, yet still a part of the Austro-Hungarian empire fighting a war for which the Czechs felt little enthusiasm (Rak 2003), the imperialist and militaristic overtones of the British scouting found little popularity.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the emphasis of Baden-Powell's scouting on religion was at odds with the growing secularizing tendencies within the Czech society, in particular among the young generation. At the same time, young Czechs could readily associate themselves with the oppressed Indians. Memories of Rudolf Noha [Rudan 1969] and Géza Včelička [in Waic and Kössl, 1992] lend some credibility to this hypothesis. The popularity of the Indian as a role model in the Czech cultural milieu is likely to be related to the earlier success of James Fenimore Cooper's books extolling the ideal of the noble savage. Last of the Mohicans was first published in Czech already in 1852 (Waic/Kössl 1992, 13).

In the years of WWI, the founders of the Czech scouting and woodcraft - Svojsík and Seifert - kept in touch and exchanged visits in summer camps (Zedníčková 1996, 37). Seifert made the first attempt to establish a larger organization based on woodcraft in 1915, but it took him another four years to take a position of a radical critic of Baden-Powell's scouting and of a passionate adherent of Seton's woodcraft (Zedníčková 1996, 37). After several years of unsuccessful attempts to found an organization similar to the Woodcraft League of America, an organization called Zálesácká liga Československa - The Woodcraft League of Czechoslovakia was eventually established in 1922 and renamed as Liga lesní moudrosti - The Woodcraft League of Czechoslovakia (LLM) a year later.

Přírodou a životem k čistému lidství (Through nature and life towards virtuous humanity), which was inspired by and drew on Seton's Book of Woodcraft and which was to become the most important text in the history of the Czechoslovak woodcraft movement, was published already in 1920. Although the main part of the book consists of practical instructions on conducting outdoor activities and studying nature, the introductory chapters amount to a programmatic document that marks a radical departure from Baden-Powell's variant of scouting. Seifert launched a fierce critique of the English scouting which was described as hopelessly hierarchical, clerical,<sup>9</sup> militaristic, imperialistic and unacceptably conservative. He was dismissive of Baden-Powell's emphasis on law-obeying citizenship, arguing that it amounted to condoning the unjust capitalist social order (Seifert 1920, 17). The official Czechoslovak school system was also subjected to harsh criticism.<sup>10</sup>

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8 In this respect it is notable that the most important Czech nationalist organization Sokol, which displayed many militaristic features, rejected Svojsík's proposal to include scouting in the range of its activities (Rudan 1969).

9 'With churches, the [Czech] scout has to be quickly done away with' (Seifert 1920).

10 No wonder that the Ministry of Education banned Seifert's book from schools (the minister was a member of Baden-Powell Union of Czechoslovak Scouts). The Ministry of Health, however, sponsored the book – the minister was a member of a socialist scouting group (Pecha 1999, 40).



## Miloš Seifert's Lasting Legacy

Seifert's personality shared some features with that of Seton, with whom he maintained correspondence from 1921 until the late 1930s,<sup>11</sup> by the wide range of interests and talents. Seifert (by the Indian name Woowotanna) was an educator, magazine editor, writer, nature conservationist, visionary, pacifist and social reformer. The contemporary Czech literature on Seifert, written by educators and veterans of the woodcraft movement (Kožíšek 1995; Pecha 1999), focuses mainly on Seifert's role of a pedagogue/writer and woodcraft movement activist. Seifert's pedagogical works included *Osvobozené mládí* (Liberated Youth) from 1925 and *Radostná škola* (Joyful School) from 1929, the latter being a sharp critique of the contemporary Czechoslovak educational system. In particular during the 1920s, he was a prolific author who published articles in a range of periodicals including professional journals *Vesmír* and *Kráska našeho domova* and translated books by his favourite authors, such as Ruskin, Thoreau and the Dutch social reformer Frederik van Eeden.<sup>12</sup> Clearly, Seifert was an inspiring, articulate and passionate writer. Pecha (1999) recalls his juvenile fascination by Seifert's *Přírodou a životem k čistému lidství*. In similar vein, two members of the oldest existing Czech woodcraft tribe Wahpeton, both in their seventies, confessed that they were attracted to woodcraft in their early teens after stumbling across Seifert's manual in their relative's and teacher's private libraries (interview, Wahpeton, 4 April 2006).

Seifert's organizational and communication skills, however, did not match his skills of a writer and educator (Pecha 1999: 36). Although respected within the movement as an intellectual authority (he remained the member of the leadership of LLM until its forced disbandment in 1939), Seifert's inability to compromise was one of the reasons behind the perpetual squabbling and factionalism within the Czechoslovak woodcraft movement in the inter-war period, which in turn might have averted people from joining the organization (LLM had 1,000 members in its peak in the mid-1920s [Kožíšek, 1995: 56]). Although in his *Přírodou a životem k čistému lidství* Seifert compared the camp life to socialism and communism and fiercely criticized the capitalist social order, he responded to growing socialist and leftwing leanings of LLM by emphasizing the spiritual dimension of woodcraft and subsequently by leaving the League in 1924 and establishing a new woodcraft organization with some 200-300 members called *Liga pro výchovu přírodou - Moudrost lesa* (League for Education Through Nature – Woodcraft) (Kožíšek, 1995: 57). Four years later the two organizations merged under the new name *Liga československých woodcrafterů* (League of Czechoslovak Woodcrafters)

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11 Seton visited Czechoslovakia for a week in 1936 and held talks with various factions of the woodcraft and scout movements. The visit took place upon the invitation of the Prague YMCA and members of the Prague woodcraft tribe *Bílý slunovrat* (Kožíšek 1995, 64).

12 Between 1911-1932 Seifert authored 18 original books and larger texts in pedagogy and nature conservation, translated another 27 books, published numerous articles in 24 periodicals and edited two magazines (*Zedníčková* 1996, 39). In the 1930s, Seifert translated and published five volumes of Seton's book on North American wildlife (Kožíšek 1995, 65).

with Seifert as a chairman. On the other hand though, another group left LLM in 1926 in protest at its insufficiently leftwing orientation to form *Internacionální socialistická asociace woodcrafterů* (ISAW). Most of its members, including the chairman Rudolf Noha, were members of the Communist Party.

During his lifetime, Seifert's influence went beyond the various relatively small woodcraft organizations. The Federation of the Czechoslovak Scout,<sup>13</sup> a loose umbrella organization of various small scout groups, established in 1920 as a leftwing counterpart to the Baden-Powell Union of Czechoslovak Scouts, accepted in 1922 Seifert's proposal to adopt Seton's woodcraft as its official educational programme (Kožíšek 1995, 59). More importantly though, Seifert's intellectual legacy and the legacy of Seton's woodcraft adapted by him to suit the Czechoslovak context are still apparent today and extend far beyond the ranks of the current Czech woodcraft and scout organizations.

Seifert's role as a pioneer of Czech nature conservation and his important contribution to the development of some of its specific features (see e.g. Seifert 1928) tends to be overlooked by both historians of the Czech woodcraft and historians of the Czech nature conservation. Yet it is obvious from his numerous articles that, being a teacher of biology by profession, Seifert felt passionately about nature protection<sup>14</sup> and saw the woodcraft movement as an integral part of nature conservation efforts: 'While woodcraft is, among other, a pacifist, temperance and religious movement, it is first and foremost a movement for nature protection' (Seifert 1925, 45). Elaborating on the statement, he emphasised both the camping experience amidst nature with limited resources and manual work such as planting trees and putting up bird boxes, as activities that contribute to the development of positive attitudes to nature. Drawing on US examples, he was also a proponent of peoples' direct involvement in nature conservation projects through the formation of conservation associations that would be in turn involved in brigades - voluntary manual work (Seifert 1926, 37).<sup>15</sup>

Seifert sought to disseminate these ideas through the official periodical of the Union of Czech Clubs for Beautification and Protection of Homeland *Krása našeho domova*. This periodical was increasingly diverging from its original concern with amateur beautification activities of local clubs and in the 1930s became 'a platform of the official and scientifically managed nature conservation in Czechoslovakia' (Librová 1986, 47). The editor of

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13 Apart from several Czech left-wing scout organizations, the members of the Federation were also Jewish scouts *Techelet-Lawan* and Prague German scouts *Prager Pfadfinder* (Kožíšek 1995, 58). In the 1930s, the Federation was under the police surveillance for radical views of some of its leaders (Kožíšek 1995, 59).

14 'No issue is more urgent than nature protection. By comparison, all other problems, whether political, social, scientific or religious, pale into insignificance, because without wild nature, all human progress and achievement will be afflicted by malaise of haughtiness and destruction, fatal to all humanity' (Seifert, 1926, 36).

15 Seifert saw nature as an ideal place for character building and education: 'It is necessary to take our urban youth to nature, not just to cook there and pitch tents, but to let them learn to observe, think and love its beauty and mysteries. Nature must not be considered to be a decoration or coulisse for people's entertainment, but the subject of study and thinking' (Seifert 1920, 22).

Krása našeho domova in the 1920s was the founder of the Czech and Czechoslovak scientific nature conservation Jan Svatopluk Procházka, whom in 1925 Seifert recruited to chair Liga pro výchovu přírodou - Moudrost lesa. This was part of his wider efforts to attract to woodcraft eminent scientists and writers to secure for the new movement a solid intellectual basis (Kožíšek 1995, 57).

Thus in the 1920s Seifert and Procházka appear to have started a trend that continues to date. Since then a number of Czech academic ecologists have apparently been able to reconcile their professional environmental activity based on scientific and technocratic rationality with romantic woodcraft and spiritual cultural ideas extolling the virtues of direct experience of pristine nature and character building of the individual. For example, Bedřich Moldan, ecologist and the first post-1989 minister of the environment, gave the following response to a journalist's question on the origin of his environmental orientation:

"When I was 14 or 15, I joined an excellent woodcraft tribe in Děčín. It was several extremely important years of my life. We went on hikes and camped out under the leadership of an erudite forester Klen. He was a person of exceptionally strong principles that were based on the ideas of Seton and woodcraft including extreme modesty and the ability to get by with very little. When we went on a hike, we mustn't have left a trace." (Papoušek 2000, 29).

Václav Mezřický, a leading figure of the 1970s and 1980s influential academic group Ekologická sekce, answered a similar question in the following way: 'And later I joined the scouts where I acquired that romantic attitude to nature and learnt various "Indian" and backwoodsman's traditions...' (Papoušek 2000, 115). Pecha (1999) stated that the majority of Czech ecologists of the 1980s and 1990s were in one way or another connected with scouting and woodcraft and drew up a list of prominent contemporary individuals in support of his argument. Pecha's list of leading environmental academics-activists – childhood scouts and woodcrafters – includes, apart from Bedřich Moldan, a leading plant ecologist Jan Jeník, forest scientist and chairman of the Society of Sustainable Living (founded in 1992 as a successor of Ekologická sekce) Igor Míchal, the Czechoslovak federal minister of the environment between 1990 and 1992 Josef Vavroušek, and the head of department of ecology at Olomouc University Milena Rychnovská.<sup>16</sup>

However, woodcraft's influence, although in a more indirect and mediated way, reached still further. Although teenagers and young adults were welcome in both scouting and woodcraft, the programme of these organizations was less attractive to older teenage boys (for most of the members were boys) and they left these organizations in pursuit of a less

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16 Another leading figure of Ekologická sekce, Pavel Trpák, was also a woodcrafter (interview, Petr Vilhelm, 4 April 2006).

regimented version of outdoor activity. The accounts of those who remember provide the evidence that already in the immediate post-WWI period large numbers of young men (and later also women) joined a movement that catered to this taste called tramping (Rudolf Noha in Rudan 1969, 13; Korda and Včelička in Waic/Kössl 1992, 11-12), which by the late 1920s reached mass proportions and which developed strong cultural and sports dimensions. The free and romantic spirit of tramping as well as its cultural references to the Wild West (through films and literature) made it easier for the tramps to associate themselves with Seton's woodcraft as adapted to Czechoslovak conditions by Seifert rather than with Baden-Powell's scouting. According to Rudan (Rudan 1969, 2), woodcraft kept exerting a strong ideational influence on tramping well into the post-WWII period

The transfer of the broader woodcraft idea from the relatively small world of primarily children's woodcraft organizations to the mass tramping movement, ultimately with a cross-generational appeal, is the main factor responsible for the widespread popularity of outdoor activities and the creation of a specific cultural formation associated with this phenomenon. An important element of this transfer must have been the formal accession of the tramping organization *Spojené trampské osady* (United Tramps Camps) with some 3,000 members to the Federation of the Czechoslovak Scout in 1934 (Zedníčková 1996, 66). Although *Liga československých woodcrafterů* (League of Czechoslovak Woodcrafters) itself had left the Federation five years earlier at a protest against its growing leftwing orientation (Kožíšek 1995, 63; Zedníčková 1996, 29-30), the woodcraft basis of activities of the Federation's member organizations was preserved.

*Liga českých woodcrafterů*, registered as a sports club after the German occupation of the Czech Lands in 1939, was banned by the Protektorat authorities only in 1944, three years after Seifert's death. During the three years of post-WWII democracy, Czechoslovak woodcrafters and scouts fully resumed their activities including annual forest schools and summer camps. The 1948 communist coup brought these activities to a halt and in January 1951 LLM (along with other civic associations and groups) succumbed to the pressure of the authorities to disband itself.

## **Troubled Times: Czech Woodcraft from 1948 to 1989**

After a lull in activities in the first half of the 1950s, woodcraft began to reappear scattered into small groups operating within the tramping movement and various legally existing organizations. At first, from 1957 onwards, it was the official newly established hiking (tourist) union where many woodcraft tribes found a refuge. Independently of the pre-WWII woodcraft tradition, a new tribe *Neskenon* was founded in Prague in 1965 and became an inspiration for similar tribes of Seton's woodcraft in other Czech cities (Kožíšek 1995, 66). Between 1964 and 1969, campers schools, at first organized by the official *Československý svaz mládeže* (Czechoslovak Union of Youth) and from 1968 by the newly founded *Česká*

tábornická unie (Czech Campers Union; ČTU), represented a parallel line of activities drawing on the woodcraft tradition (Hanuš 1996, 33). Taking advantage of the political thaw known as the Prague Spring, former members of the banned LLM decided to revive it and apply for its official registration to the Ministry of Interior. Following the rejection of their application, woodcrafters remained active within ČTU until its ban in 1970.

In the second half of the 1960s, the Prague sports publishing house Olympia set out to publish Seton's wildlife books.<sup>17</sup> At the last minute, before the window of opportunity closed at the end of the 1960s, their translator Miloš Zapletal persuaded the company to include *Kniha lesní moudrosti* (an anthology of *The Book of Woodcraft* and *The Birch Bark Roll*) as part of the series (Kožíšek, 1995: 66; Pecha, 1999). In the following two decades, the book, published in a large number of copies, was instrumental in the spread of woodcraft-inspired activities of hundreds of tramp camps and children's clubs in various legally existing outdoor organizations (Kožíšek, 1995: 66).

In the 1970s, some woodcrafters found a shelter in Tis,<sup>18</sup> a nature conservation group, and after its ban in 1979,<sup>19</sup> in its successor organization Český svaz ochránců přírody (Czech Union for Nature Protection; ČSOP). The leadership of Tis saw tramping and the Tis-style environmental activism as kindred souls. In 1969-1970, Eva Olšanská, who was in charge of the Tis's educational section also ran, under the title 'The Sprig of Yew' a column in a monthly magazine *Tramp*. In this way she disseminated information on the work of Tis within the tramping movement and recruited new members to the organization.

A significant contribution to the maintaining of the woodcraft tradition throughout the period of state socialism was made by the Czech writer Jaroslav Foglar. Despite periodical bans on the publishing of his writings, his books on boy clubs engaged in outdoor scout- and woodcraft-like activities remained immensely popular during the whole post-WWII period. In his journalistic capacity, Foglar developed a unique model of organizing children into clubs by using children's magazines as guiding and communication hubs. In the 1960s, the magazine *abc* launched, with Foglar's participation, the scheme of readers clubs, some of which were called *Setonovy kluby lesní moudrosti* (Seton's Woodcraft Clubs) (Toman 2005, 38-39). The maximum number of clubs affiliated to *abc* reached 6,500 with some 20,000 actively participating children.<sup>20</sup> However, this was already the third application of the same scheme, which was first tested between 1937 and 1941 when 24,600 readers clubs (with about 100,000 members) affiliated

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17 Between WWII and mid-1990s, more than a million copies of Seton's books were sold in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic (Kožíšek 1995, 52).

18 Between 1958 and 1969, Tis, under the name *Sbor ochrany přírody* (Union for Nature Protection), was the only nature conservation group in Czechoslovakia. It was founded in 1958 by the zoologist and former scout Otakar Leiský (by the scout name Ralf). It began as an outdoor children's group and maintained a youth section with a programme modelled on scouting and woodcraft throughout its existence.

19 At its peak in 1979, Tis had 16,000 members (Leiský 2004).

20 Toman (Toman 2005, 40) also claims that teepee, whose use was banned after 1948, was rehabilitated at a gathering of *abc*'s readers clubs in the mid-1960.

with the children's magazine *Mladý hlasatel* were involved in a programme of activities based on the idea of self-improvement. The second time this idea was brought to life in the three years of post-war democracy, when 12,300 readers clubs took part in the programme launched under the auspices of the magazine *Vpřed* (Hanuš 1996, 31).<sup>21</sup>

The deep-rooted traditional popularity of Indians in the Czech society received a fresh major impulse in the mid-1960s with the arrival of West German film adaptations of Karl May's books on the Apache chief Vinnnetou.<sup>22</sup> The children's magazine *abc*, with the circulation of 130,000 copies, obtained as the first Czech periodical the rights to publish stills from the films that were used as illustrations accompanying the serialization of May's books, which in turn raised its circulation by some 15,000 copies (Toman 2005, 67).

Shortly after the defeat of the Prague Spring, during which tramping was freely discussed, the movement was again shrouded in secrecy and silence (Bren 2002). Later in the 1970s and 1980s, the authorities adopted the strategy of repression combined with attempts at accommodation of the movement in the official structures. Nevertheless, in those two decades, tramping remained largely beyond the regime's control and enjoyed a renewed and growing popularity while it nurtured traditional values such as the working knowledge of nature, modest lifestyle, self-reliance and camaraderie. Miloslav Nevrlý's collection of short essays extolling the spiritual and aesthetic experience of hiking with the minimal equipment and provisions, published in 1986 at a limited press run as a semi-official publication of a climbing club in Ústí nad Labem, met with an enthusiastic response from members of all outdoor groups in Czechoslovakia and were disseminated in unofficial copies.<sup>23</sup> Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, the popular youth weekly *Mladý svět* published by the Socialistický svaz mládeže (Socialist Union of Youth; SSM) ran a regular column for tramps and organized the national competition in tramp poetry and fiction which provided tramping with certain degree of legitimacy.

Since 1974, this weekly and its reporter Josef Velek in particular, played a key role in the growing popularity of an environmental programme of activities under the auspices SSM which came to be called *Hnutí Brontosaurus* (Movement Brontosaurus). *Brontosaurus* gradually developed a range of activities aimed at young people between 15 and 25, which was partly derived from the woodcraft educational system (summer camps combining outdoor games and basics of ecology with work brigades – typically management of nature reserves). The movement had 10,000 activists in its peak in the 1980s, but dozens thousands young people have

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21 In 2005, Foglar-style readers clubs were launched for the fourth time in a children's monthly *Moje 1. noviny* with the circulation of 60,000 copies.

22 The first translation of Karl May's book into Czech was published already in 1892 (Hulciusová 2003, 74).

23 The title of one of the essays was *Hra na veselou skromnost* (The Game of Joyful Modesty).

taken part in their camps and weekend brigades since the mid-1970s to date.<sup>24</sup>

Another activity programme that developed within SSM and that partly drew on the woodcraft culture (Hanuš 1998, 8) was Prázdninová škola Lipnice (Vacation School Lipnice; PŠL).<sup>25</sup> Its history can be traced back to campers schools held in the 1960s, which were organised first by SSM (1964-1967) and later by the ČTU (1968-1970). Since its foundation in 1977, PŠL offered experiential education courses to young adults who would spend a week or more in a rural setting engaged in physically challenging outdoor activities, cultural programmes, and 'social games' that were designed to foster self-awareness. PŠL gradually transformed into an alternative movement, which in the last decade of state socialism confronted the spiritual emptiness, alienation and the stereotype of material consumption through the offer of unique and innovative programmes of experiential learning (Hanuš 1998, 9).

## **Woodcraft after 1989: Testing the Viability of the Renewed Tradition**

The efforts to re-establish a woodcraft organization intensified in the second half of the 1980s and centred on the Prague woodcraft tribe Bílý wampum. The strong Indian orientation of the tribe's activities has had a major impact on the rise and spread of Euroindians in Czechoslovakia as well as on the Indian orientation of the revived Liga lesní moudrosti (LLM) in the post-1989 period (Kožíšek 1995, 67). Old woodcraft veterans joined active tribes at a gathering commemorating the 130th anniversary of Seton's birth in March 1990 and in May of the same year the Ministry of Interior registered LLM as an independent organization. Liga immediately began to publish the quarterly Bizoní vítr (Buffalo Wind) and the internal newsletter Totemová deska (Totem Pole Board). Tribes associated with LLM resumed traditional woodcraft activities: summer and increasingly also winter campouts in teepees, courses for leaders and production of manuals and other educational materials.

After the initial steep rise, the membership stabilised in 1993 at about 1,000 members in 50 tribes. It has to be said, though, that a larger number of people are members of groups that follow some version of the woodcraft educational programme either are registered with other organizations or are not registered at all. This might partly be due to the Liga's orthodox Indian orientation. Many groups with woodcraft programme are part of the Union of Scouts. With its 10,000 members, the renewed ČTU is likely to be the largest organisation with the programme strongly influenced by the Czech woodcraft tradition (and citing Seton as its main ideational authority – Hanuš/Jirásek 1996, 54). ČTU claims to be a continuation of the United Tramp Camps from

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24 Today, Hnutí Brontosaurus is an independent organisation with a similar repertoire of action as in the state socialist era.

25 PŠL took its name from a small town and castle Lipnice, where the school had its first base and where many of its trademark activities were developed.

the 1930s and of ČTU from the 1968-1979 period. However, the spectrum of organizations referring to Seton's woodcraft is wider and includes Woodcrafter based in Ostrava. In 1996 this mainly sports and travel oriented organization (with its commercial agency Agentura Lesní Moudrosti) claimed membership of 1,500 (Hanuš/Jirásek 1996, 52).

While LLM and other organizations with a clear link to the pre-WWII woodcraft adopted, as a result of the persecution experienced during the years of state socialism a more conservative, exclusive and inward oriented version of woodcraft, groups more loosely associated with this tradition such as Brontosaurus, that originated and thrived in the socialist era, have developed a more progressive programme of activities. While referring to the foundational pillars of Czech woodcraft (low-impact outdoor activities, study of nature and modest lifestyle), Brontosaurus have continued the more progressive agenda of brigades and voluntary work that go beyond the fulfilling of the self-interests of its members, as its activities are open to the general public.

In the immediate post-1989 period, PŠL expanded its repertoire of activities by introducing team-building programmes for corporate clients in order to attract a wider range of participants and generate income to subsidise its non-commercial operation. In 1991, the organization joined Outward Bound International as its Czech chapter. On the other hand, in recent years, PŠL has at least partly revisited its original woodcraft roots. A 12-day winter course titled *Život je gotickej pes* (Life is a Gothic Dog) that invites its participants to cross a mountain range on snowshoes and sleep in teepees is one example of the deliberate return to the tradition (Hanuš 2004).

Czech woodcraft historians and thinkers (Pecha 1995, 141; Kožíšek et al. 1995, 149-150; Pecha 1999, 184) emphasized the increasingly important value of woodcraft as an educational system that instils in its adherents respect and positive attitudes to nature and that offers, through romance and sense of community, an alternative to consumerist entertainment. Pecha (Pecha 1999, 184) unequivocally stated that in today's world 'woodcrafters are allies of ecological organizations' and, drawing on Librová's (1993) research, examined the relationship between woodcraft and the phenomenon of voluntary simplicity (Pecha 1999, 191-194). However, it seems that organizations inspired by, but only loosely associated with the woodcraft movement such as Brontosaurus, represent a more direct response to today's individualistic and consumerist society than the more traditional woodcraft groups such as LLM.

## **Discussion and Conclusion: Czech Woodcraft – a Perennial Alternative?**

Woodcraft, tramping and scouting are in the Czech historical context a manifestation of a cultural formation whose origin lies in the early years of the 20th century. The common historical point of reference for all three strands are the ideas and writings of Ernest Thompson Seton. Unlike other countries, even those that did not endure decades of undemocratic regimes,



the Czech woodcraft was able to survive for nearly a century. It owes its longevity to its early transformation from a marginal movement into a mass cultural formation. While the Czech woodcraft-inspired culture (music, literature, magazines and films) has always nurtured among its adherents positive attitudes to nature, modest lifestyle, self-reliance, mutual trust, friendship and a sense of community, the movement has gone through several major transformations.

Before WWII, much of the Czechoslovak woodcraft-related movement represented an alternative and left-leaning youth subculture which was critical of the bourgeois political establishment (Rudan 1969; Bren 2002; Vágner/Procházka 2004) and of the modern industrial society. It also posed a radical challenge to the official educational system. In contrast to earlier outdoor movement focused on the domestic Czech-German national competition such as hiking, the Czech woodcraft, including its more radical left-wing elements, was a cosmopolitan movement avidly following broader international trends. Its main protagonists maintained intensive contacts with leading figures of the movement abroad. By introducing works of Seton, Thoreau, Hargrave and others thinkers of the time, the arrival of woodcraft in the Czech Lands and later Czechoslovakia amounted to an important intellectual innovation in a number of fields, including education and nature conservation.

In the state socialist era, woodcraft-inspired activities enabled people of all age groups to find a refuge from oppressive every-day reality with a group of like-minded friends in their log cabins or campsites. In the same way as other 'silent dissent' movements of the state socialist period, woodcraft developed anti-leftwing political attitudes. Woodcraft, although often not referred to as such, retained its popularity during the four decades of state socialism due to its mildly oppositional nature and its rootedness in the 'golden age' of Czech history – the interwar democratic Czechoslovakia. At the same time, due to the restricted ability to communicate with the outside world, Czech woodcraft groups lost their international contacts and evolved an inward and past-oriented, relatively conservative outlook. The focus on perfecting the tradition was reinforced by the cult status of Seton classical works.

To survive, woodcrafters sought sanctuary in regime-sanctioned organizations. Not surprisingly, given their close affinity with nature and outdoor activities, they soon found this refuge in the science-based, and hence apparently apolitical, sphere of nature conservation. The emphasis of all major Czech nature conservation organizations in the post-WWII period on developing their youth section with education programmes relying on outdoor experience are not self-explanatory. A number of recent interviews conducted by Jehlička and his colleagues (Jehlička et al. 2005) with contemporary Czech environmental movement intellectuals identified the broadly defined woodcraft-inspired culture as their formative experience. Out of 21 respondents, five mentioned their tramping experience, four their childhood membership in scouts and another four referred to the influence of romantic books on the 19th century American West by the German writer

Karl May, of books by E.T. Seton and of books on the Czech scouting by Jaroslav Foglar.<sup>26</sup>

Due to the association of woodcraft-related activities with the opposition to the communist regime, for a brief period following the 1989 political change, woodcraft found itself on the side of the dominant political camp. However, as the establishment of the new neoliberal social paradigm progressed, the more socially engaged heirs of the Czech woodcraft tradition such as Brontosaurus, found themselves in a more familiar territory of the social alternative, this time to the dominant individualistic and consumerist culture. Thus, after nearly a century of activity, the Czech woodcraft continues to do what it has always endeavoured to do: to instil, through outdoor activities, positive attitudes to nature in children and young people and to spread the awareness that modest lifestyle is an alternative worth exploring. By developing into a broad cultural phenomenon that has endured decades of turbulent Czech history, the Czech variant of woodcraft can thus hardly be considered a failed movement.

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<sup>26</sup> Václav Vašků, the former Greenpeace Czech Republic's spokesperson, attributed his interest in environmental protection to several childhood years spent in the Prague woodcraft tribe Neskenon in the 1970s (interview, 12 April 2006).

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