
PAWEŁ KRAS^{*}

FRANTIŠEK ŠMAHEL (1934–2025)

On 5 January 2025, at the age of 90, Professor František Šmahel, the doyen and *paterfamilias* of Czech medievalists, a renowned scholar and leading expert of Hussitism died. František Šmahel held key positions in the Czech academy, serving as director of the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of Czechoslovakia (after 1993 Czech Republic), and founder and first director of the Centre for Medieval Studies in Prague. In recent decades, he was widely considered a leading representative and ambassador of Czech medieval studies. As Martin Nodl aptly wrote in his recollections on his mentor, František Šmahel's death 'ended an entire era in Czech historiography, which began in the 1960s'. František Šmahel belonged to a generation of Czech scholars who began their academic careers during the political thaw that followed Stalin's death. The erosion of dogmatic canons imposed by Communist Party-controlled Marxist historiography and freer access to the world of Western European scholarship enabled Šmahel and his generation of Czechoslovak historians to boldly tackle difficult research topics and employ modern methods.

History, which became František Šmahel's passion from a young age and in which he reached the heights of scholarly mastery, repeatedly painfully tested him and his loved ones. Becoming a historian not only by

* Paweł Kras – Professor of Medieval History at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Director of the Centre for Medieval Studies in Lublin, Poland; e-mail: pawel.kras@kul.pl; ORCID: 0000-0002-4844-1943.

passion but also by profession required a long journey, facing adversity, political turmoil, and human envy. His life demonstrates that he never doubted the value of practising history, and even as a miner, conscript, and tram driver, he was able to pursue his interest in the past. He was born on 17 August 1934, in Trhová Kamenice, a small town in the Chrudim District, nestled at the foot of the Iron Mountains (*Železné Hory*). His father owned a grocery shop, which provided the family with a decent living. In their rather spacious and well-equipped apartment in the building above their shop, his parents had a library, which young František eagerly explored, immersing himself in classic Czech and world literature. He also acquired a love of classical music from his family home. The communist takeover in Czechoslovakia in 1948 worsened the Šmahel family's situation. His father lost his shop, and his grandfather, who ran a prosperous farmstead, was branded a kulak. Further problems arose from the activities of his uncle, a Czechoslovak army officer before World War II, who was arrested by the communists for his questionable views.

Despite excellent results at the Chrudim Grammar School, František Šmahel was unable to embark immediately on university studies at Charles University in Prague. Before being allowed to study, he had to work for a year as a miner at the Jan Šverma Mine in Ostrava. In 1954, he was permitted to matriculate at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague. Initially, he studied art history, but ultimately completed a degree in history and archival studies. His historical interests were shaped by the influence of distinguished professors, who quickly recognized his talents. His MA thesis, later published, focused on humanism in Bohemia under King George of Poděbrady. His supervisor was Josef Polišenský, a historian of modern history and a scholar with extensive international contacts. Thanks to his support, Šmahel made his first trips abroad to Paris, Budapest, and Warsaw. During his university studies, Šmahel's interests were greatly influenced by František Graus and Josef Macek, leading medievalists working at the Institute of History of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, whose extensive syntheses of the former on the history of peasants in medieval Bohemia and the latter on the Hussite Revolution became a source of methodological inspiration for him.

Despite excellent grades, Šmahel was prevented from pursuing a university career. This was due to his close ties to Polišenský, whose

contacts with the Western world aroused the suspicions of the communist authorities. After completing his compulsory military service, Šmahel took a job as director of the Regional Museum in Litvínov. The political thaw in Czechoslovakia in the early 1960s opened up opportunities for Šmahel to work at the Institute of History of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, which began accepting applicants without a Communist Party card. Alongside Šmahel, later leaders of Czech medieval studies, such as Dušan Třestík, Jaroslav Mezník, and Jaroslav Marek, also found employment at the Institute around the same time. The Institute of History located at Hradčany Castle was then an elite research unit, where the previously mentioned Graus and Macek worked, and where Jaroslav Eršil and Jiří Spěvaček, both highly educated in the classical art of editing, prepared subsequent volumes of editions of medieval sources.

In his early career, Šmahel focused on Czech humanism and the history of Charles University, culminating in his doctoral dissertation on the students of Charles University before the Hussite Revolution, published in 1967 (*Pražské univerzitní studentstvo v předrevolučním období, 1399–1419*). This work showcased Šmahel's analytical skills and comprehensive source erudition. At the same time, however, Šmahel was interested in historical biography, and his passion resulted in the works on Jerome of Prague, an intellectual nonconformist and eager promotor of John Wyclif's doctrine, and Jan Žižka of Trocnov, a famous Hussite hetman and leader of the radical Taborites. He also became interested in Jan Hus, and in his popularizing work *Hranice pravdy*, published in 1969, he presented a crime-style dramatization of the life of the leader of the Bohemian Reformation. Šmahel's most innovative and groundbreaking work published during his employment at the Institute of History was a study on the development of national and religious consciousness in Hussite Bohemia (*Idea národa v husitských Čechách*, 1971). Drawing on extensive and diverse source material, he presented the emergence of a national identity that became a catalyst for revolutionary socio-religious transformations in late medieval Bohemia.

The brilliant rise of Šmahel's academic career was interrupted during the so-called normalization period following the crushing of the Prague Spring by the invasion of Warsaw Pact forces. While Šmahel himself did not personally participate in the crucial events that quelled the rebellion in Prague, due to his close relationship with Josef Macek

and his position at the Institute of History, he was deemed by the new leadership of the Institute to be suspicious and ideologically unstable. In 1970, he was stripped of his membership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and was unable to find permanent employment at the purged Institute of History. Until 1973, his contracts were renewed for several months, allowing him to complete his research and publication projects, but his new responsibilities became more and more limited. His final term at the Institute ended in December 1973. Branded as an ideologically suspect scholar, he was unable to find employment not only within university or academic institutions, but also in schools. Despite the opportunity to leave Czechoslovakia and an offer to work at Columbia University in New York, Šmahel decided to remain in the country. To provide his family with a decent living, in 1974 he took a job as a tram driver in Prague. As he himself recalled, working as a tram driver provided him with a decent salary and a sense of independence, while also allowing him to pursue his research. Driving the tram near Prague's research libraries, he was able to exchange books, and while on duty at the loops, he had time to devote himself to reading. With his unique sense of humour, Šmahel enjoyed telling his friends and students various anecdotes related to his work as a tram driver. One of my favourite stories is about his meeting with Miloslav Vlk, later cardinal and archbishop of Prague, who, barred from priesthood by the communists in the 1970s, made his living washing windows. Father Vlk, whom Šmahel knew from their shared studies at Charles University, asked him to bring back colourful posters of John Paul II from his visit to Poland. Šmahel complied, and the transfer of the smuggled posters took place at one of the tram stops.

During this difficult period, Polish medievalists came to Šmahel's aid. At the invitation of Bronisław Geremek, Jerzy Kłoczowski, Jerzy B. Korolec, and Mieczysław Markowski, Šmahel traveled to Poland, participated in academic conferences, and published his works in Poland. In December 1975 he attended the conference entitled 'Elite Culture and Mass Culture in Late Medieval Poland', organized by Bronisław Geremek in Kazimierz Dolny, where he met leading Polish medievalists with whom he would later collaborate. He recalled that attending this conference made him realize how far Czech historiography lagged behind Polish historiography, which had been developing for many years under the stimulating influence of innovative trends in Western

European historiography, primarily the French *Annales* School. In Poland, Šmahel obtained Polish editions of the latest international publications in medieval studies, which were unavailable in Czechoslovakia, and for this reason Poland was for him – as he often emphasized – ‘a promised land’.

His work as a tram driver did not hinder his intensive research into Hussitism, although he was only able to publish his findings abroad to a limited extent. His meticulously collected and systematically processed source materials allowed him to prepare new monographs and articles, which he began publishing extensively in the 1980s. After five years as a tram driver, Šmahel returned to a research position in 1980, finding employment at the Museum of the Hussite Movement in Tábor. During this time, he prepared the two-volume *Dejiny Tábora* (1989–1990), which served as a precursor to the publication of his *opus vitae*, the four-volume *Husitská revoluce* in 1993. After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, which led to the fall of communist rule in Czechoslovakia, Šmahel’s career skyrocketed. In 1990, he received his doctorate and became director of the Institute of History of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, a position he held for two terms until 1998. In 1991, he completed his habilitation (higher degree), and two years later became a professor at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague. For the next five years, for the first time in his career, he had the opportunity to teach at his *alma mater*. As participants in his classes recall, Šmahel’s arrival at the university was like a breath of spring. His seminars exposed students to modern methods of international medieval studies, developed analytical skills, and encouraged independence in tackling difficult and neglected research problems. The culmination of Šmahel’s organizational work was the establishment of the Centre for Medieval Studies in Prague (Centrum medievistických studií) in 1998, of which he became the first director. Operating within the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences, the Centre has become a prestigious research unit that has achieved a significant place in global medieval studies. Šmahel founded the Prague Centre as a platform for integrating Czech medieval studies, open to collaboration with foreign institutions, implementing fundamental research and publication projects, and educating young Czech researchers.

His new organizational and teaching responsibilities in 1990s were accompanied by an explosion of his publishing activity. Over

the years, the studies he had accumulated finally found opportunities for publication. Almost every year, alongside his monographs, dozens of scholarly articles appeared in Czech and international journals, as well as in numerous collective works – often as a result of international conferences he organized. It is impossible even to list all of these initiatives in such a short text, but the collective volumes he edited on medieval eschatology, religious tolerance, and medieval rituals are worth mentioning. His tireless energy also fuelled the preparation of critical editions of sources on the history of the Czech Reformation. Thanks to his efforts, work on Jan Hus's *Opera omnia* was resumed, and began to be published by Brepols. In collaboration with Gabriel Silagi, he prepared the edition of Jerome of Prague's academic writings and correspondence (*Magistri Hieronymi de Praga quaestiones, polemica, epistulae*, 2010), and, in collaboration with Zuzanna Silagiová, an edition of the oldest catalogues of books of the University of Prague (*Catalogi librorum vetustissimi Universitatis Pragensis*, 2015), both published in the *Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio Mediaevalis* series. He also prepared a Latin-Czech edition of Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini's chronicle *Historia Bohemica* (1998), one of the most valuable historiographical sources on the history of Hussite Bohemia, whose popularity had a profound impact on the perception of Bohemia in late medieval and early modern Europe. It is worth mentioning that, in addition to works on Hussitism, Šmahel also published studies on the history of the University of Prague in the Middle Ages (*Die Prager Universität im Mittelalter. Gesammelte Aufsätze / The Charles University in the Middle Ages. Selected Studies*, 2007), the history of medieval Bohemia (*Husitské Čechy. Structures, processes, ideas*, 2001; *Uprostřed Evropy*, 2022), as well as medieval imagery (*Diví lidé v imaginaci pozdního středověku*, 2012) and verbal and iconographic communication (*Nahlédnutí do středověku. Mluva písma a četba obrazů*, 2017). A special place in his legacy is occupied by the richly illustrated study of Emperor Charles IV of Luxembourg's journey to France in 1377 (*Cesta Karla IV. do Francie 1377–1378*, 2006), which is an excellent example of Šmahel's mastery in microhistory.

František Šmahel's enormous body of work, which comprises 60 books, over 300 articles, and over 500 reviews, is a remarkable achievement. Despite the vast range of his research interests, František Šmahel was, is, and will long be perceived primarily as one of the most distinguished scholars of Hussitism. It is not without reason that his British

friend, Anne Hudson, who died in 2021, called him ‘the king of Hussite studies’. His extensive, four-volume synthesis of the Hussite revolution, which alongside three Czech editions was also published in German and Polish, will long remain a fundamental study and a treasure trove of information on Hussitism. The Centre for Medieval Studies in Prague, now run by his successors, holds a special place in Šmahel’s legacy as the living embodiment of his passion and dreams. František Šmahel’s friends aptly say that he had a beautiful and fulfilling life.

For anyone interested in František Šmahel’s life and achievements, it is recommended to read the extensive interview with him conducted by Pavlina Rychterová, published in 2019 in English (*Times of Upheaval. Four Medievalists in Twentieth-Century Central Europe* [Budapest – New York, Central European University Press]) and later in Czech (*Časy otřesů. Čtyři medievisté a dvacáté století ve střední Evropě* [Prague, Academia, 2024]).