

THE PRODUCTION OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA'S MOST POPULAR TELEVISION SERIAL *THE HOSPITAL ON THE OUTSKIRTS* AND ITS POST-1989 REPEATS

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Abstract: During the 1970s and 1980s - the so-called normalisation era in Czechoslovakia - serials were the main staple of Czechoslovak Television (ČST) 's schedule. TV serials of the normalisation era had high viewer ratings, and are still present in the memories of the viewers of the time. TV serials are part of the audiences' personal history. Based on archival research, this article tries to interpret the success of the serial *Hospital on the Outskirts*, and of its post-1989 repeats. The original version achieved success with a large audience in Czechoslovakia as well as other countries. In 1981, the West German television broadcaster Norddeutscher Rundfunk even co-produced the filming of another seven episodes. After the change of regime in 1989, the serial first made a comeback in the form of repeats. At the beginning of the 21st century, Czech Television (ČT) produced a sequel named *Hospital on the Outskirts After Twenty Years*. The sequel was introduced in 2003 and its release was accompanied by great anticipation of the audience as well as critics. Czech Television shot more episodes in 2008: *Hospital on the Outskirts - New Life Stories*.

Keywords: Television serials, Czechoslovak television, sequels, audiences

1 Czech Society And Memory

In 2009, Françoise Mayer, the French historian and sociologist, published her book *Czechs and their Communism: Memory and Political Identity* in which she gave a detailed analysis of Czech post-socialist memory. She attempted to describe the spectrum of Czech perceptions of the past. According to the author, the perception of the past after the political changes in 1989 got to the core of the process of creating a new identity. The end of the previous regime

represented a founding myth, associated with metaphors such as “revival”, “return” and “liberation”. Czech society had to somehow adopt a stance on the past. The key to this was the official memory, associated with the actions of the state apparatus. Its principles included the rehabilitation of political prisoners, restitution and investigations of the activities of the State Security (StB) and their agents. Besides this official memory linked to politics and the state apparatus, there is also a non-political memory. According to Françoise Mayer, the popularity of films, television series and pop stars in the Czech environment can be explained by the fact that ‘they show an apolitical view of history, thus recreating the past for those people “without a story”, who were not communist recruiters, former prisoners or former dissidents; they did not get particularly involved with or against the communists, and after all, they make up the vast silent majority of the population’.¹

For pre-1989 audiences, who lived a static life in a closed society, television series provided an escape from the world and from a society filled with boredom. The viewer could enjoy the suspense of the narratives and the twists in the lives of the TV characters. At that time, people concealed their opinion on a daily basis and became accustomed to hypocrisy; most did not actively try to oppose the regime. Some could feel ashamed that they did not have the courage to break away from a system of compromise. Television allowed momentary forgetfulness from everyday reality and boredom and provided escapism into a world where their onscreen heroes experienced a more interesting life.

The Slovak philosopher Milan Šimečka described the situation as living through a “large (historical) and small (daily) history.”² The memories of popular culture, such as the television serials analysed here, belong to the “small history”. The desire for the revival of the small history after 1989 can be interpreted as a defence against the social demand to condemn “large history”, and take some of the blame for it. In terms of “small history”, each person had to deal with the situation alone. Of course, one cannot live without a past and people carry in their memories what they experienced prior to 1989. The shared experience of popular culture, remains however in the collective memory. Audiences, who engaged with media and popular culture, saw the same television series, recognized the same pop singers and watched the same films in cinema. This illustrates the process analysed by Maurice Halbwachs:

Our memories remain collective memories at all times and we are reminded of others, even if these relate to events and matters in which we participated ourselves or to which we were only witnesses. This is because in reality, we are never alone.³

According to Halbwachs, strictly individual memory is impossible, because even the most personal thoughts and feelings find their source in clearly defined social environments and circumstances.

Post-socialist society transitioned from one political regime to another and had to try to redefine its identity. Society needed to redefine itself against the past. Some of the distancing from the past was taken place by renaming the streets and squares, removing communist political statues and disclosing the names of State Security agents. This was clearly a manifest departure from the past. However, as Françoise Mayer points out, in the Czech context the relationship with this past is highly complicated:

Czech society generally condemns collaboration, cooperation with the State Security and all this is taken into account, but as soon as it involves someone specific, a certain individual case, then the debate changes and excuses and extenuating circumstances are found, or there is talk about political abuse.⁴

Each person carries the memories of his/her own life under the totalitarian regime. Watching an old television series can also be seen as forming a new relationship with old times. Interest in the pop culture of the communist regime can be considered as an attempt to regain one’s own past. Irena Reifová, the Czech media theorist, defines this

1 Françoise Mayer, *Češi a jejich komunismus: paměť a politická identita* (transl. *Czechs and Their Communism: Memory and Political Identity*), Argo, 2009, p. 259

2 Milan Šimečka, *Kruhová obrana* (transl. *Circular Defense*), Archa, 1992

3 Maurice Halbwachs, *Kolektivní paměť* (transl. *Collective Memory*), SLON, 2009, p. 51

4 Françoise Mayer, *Češi a jejich komunismus: paměť a politická identita*, (transl. *Czechs and Their Communism: Memory and Political Identity*), Argo, 2009, p. 212

relationship as such: “It is an attempt to pick up from the depository an indispensable part of everyday life lived under an expendable political regime”.⁵ The communist regime ended, which was welcomed by most people, although the majority also wanted a certain degree of continuity in their lives. Their personal life did not start in November 1989 and the memories of everyday life under the communist regime could not be disposed of. These memories were associated with manifestations of popular culture. People therefore returned back to these, as they were part of their personal history. In the Czech context, this is reflected in the increased interest in repeated television series, which audiences strongly associated with memories of the period before 1989.

2 Czechoslovak Television And TV Serials In The Normalization Era

During the 1970s and 1980s of the 20th century (the so-called ‘normalization era’⁶) television serials represented the basic elements of the programme plans of Czechoslovak Television (ČST).⁷ At this point in time, TV viewers could choose between channels 1 and 2. TV serials of this period had high viewer ratings. Its management believed, in agreement with the ideologists of the ruling Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ), that these serials had a “wide propaganda and agitation effect”⁸ and thus they became ‘objectively the most efficient dramatic form to help fulfil the role of political ideology of television as an institution.’⁹ The serial had two main purposes. First, its task was to offer TV viewers a picture of what pretended to be contemporary life. However, it was evident that this picture was more or less free of unpleasant social phenomena. This helped to support the official party politics represented by a kind of exchange of a relative economic abundance (at least in the first few years of this era) for a retreat from the public to the private.¹⁰ Secondly, the TV serial had a normative role, being a tool for serving the regime and presenting viewers with the rules, values and sanctions of the socialist society.¹¹

On the one hand, TV serials served propaganda purposes and showed people at work, on the other hand, they showed main characters with complicated personal lives. The creators focused on both the professional and personal lives of the characters. A widely used stereotype was a protagonist with professional success and personal problems. The plot and the interesting psychology of the characters who were played by famous actors, were the likely reasons for the relatively high viewing figures of those serials. Czechoslovak Television presented TV serials as a key feature of their schedules and paid consistent attention to promoting these TV serials before broadcasting. Every episode of the serial provoked a lot of discussion among people and audiences in Czechoslovakia were connected by the shared viewing experience.¹²

As we can surmise from the archives of ČST, TV viewers found TV serials attractive.¹³ ČST’s research programme and audience department used a sociological research method: a group of viewers filled in diaries and rated their satisfaction with the broadcast programme on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest). The department subsequently prepared materials (results of research and audience satisfaction, analysis of viewers’ letters) for the committee of the

5 Irena Reifová, ‘Post-socialistická televizní publika: normalizační seriály v současných diváckých repertoárech, (transl. ‘Post Socialist Television Audiences: Normalisation Serial in the Present Television Viewer Repertoires’), in: Česká média a Evropská unie (transl. *Czech Media and European Union*), Metropolitní univerzita 2009, p. 97

6 In Czech history, the period from April 1969 to November 1989 is called normalization. It begins with the election of Gustáv Husák as head of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and ends with the fall of the Communist regime. The normalization era was connected with the persecution of dissidents, complicated economic situation of the state in the 1980s, devastation of the environment, and an atmosphere of general moral decay.

7 [When the Czechoslovak federation and federal television ceased to exist. ČST was replaced with public broadcaster Czech Television \(ČT\)](#)

8 ‘Evaluation of the Plan of Ideological Topics 1976 - Prepared by the Main Editorial Office of the Channel’, February 1977, Archives of Czech Television, Prague, 2 39a

9 Ibid.

10 Paulina Bren has written about the role of TV serials and series produced by ČST in *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism After the 1968*. Prague Spring, Cornell University Press, 2010

11 See Irena Reifová, ‘Cult and ideology: serial narratives in communist television: the case of the Czechoslovak serial television production of 1959-1989,’ in: *Democracy, Journalism and Technology: New Developments in an Enlarged Europe*, Tartu University Press, 2008, p. 295-307

12 See Irena Reifová, ‘Kleine Geschichte der Fernsehserie in der Tschechoslowakei und in Tschechien,’ in: Ivo Bock, Wolfgang Schlott, Hartmute Trepper, eds., *Kommerz, Kunst, Unterhaltung. Die neue Populärkulturen in Zentral- und Osteuropa*, Edition Temmen, 2002, p. 161-185

13 Results of Audience Research (written documents), Archives of Czech Television, Prague, Archive of Programme Funds, Archive Fund Ve, Department of Programme and Audience Research.

general director of ČST. The director, his deputies and editors would evaluate the results every week. Viewers also wrote letters and assessed the quality of television broadcasts. The research programme and audience department also prepared the analysis of these letters for the management.

This essay deals with the TV serial *Nemocnice na kraji města* ("Hospital on the Outskirts"), originated in the normalization era, as well with the production of two follow-up serials at the beginning of 21st century. It discusses why TV serials made during the communist regime are still popular in the Czech Republic. It also discusses why there are attempts to produce follow-ups of this serial.

3 *Nemocnice Na Kraji Města* ('Hospital On The Outskirts') 1978 And 1981

The script of *Nemocnice na kraji města* was written by Jaroslav Dietl, who had been writing a number of TV serials since 1959, when he was one of the authors of the first Czechoslovak TV serial called *The Bláha Family*.¹⁴ *Nemocnice na kraji města* was premiered from 5th November to 30th December 1978 and it has had exceptional ratings from the first episodes, with rating of 93 % and an average satisfaction coefficient of 8.1 (out of a maximum of 10 points).¹⁵

The serial *Nemocnice na kraji města* pictured professional and personal problems of health care workers of an orthopaedic ward ran by senior doctor Sova at a hospital in a fictitious district town called Bor. The mission of this serial was, among others, to promote the socialist health care system. Reviews of that time have criticised the representation of the hospital itself as an ideal, which was extremely far off reality. The hospital in Bor was presented as a department with doctors who were experts, health care workers who worked well and with well-equipped operating theatres, though this was only a district town hospital. In real life however, Czechoslovak viewers were well acquainted with health care facilities that did not function nearly as ideally as the hospital in Bor. By comparison with other serials of that time, *Nemocnice* put much less stress on the leading role of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. It contained less sequences showing staff meetings. The lifestyle of the characters differed from the common characters of other TV serials. Senior doctor Sova lived in a big family house and had a housekeeper. One of the doctors bought a car made in a capitalist country. The fact that one of the women doctors had an illegitimate child was not presented as a negative thing. The viewers seemed to have been satisfied with the serial *Nemocnice na kraji města* and wrote letters which have been analysed by ČST's department of audience and programme research. Viewers positively responded to the characters, dialogues, and the way the story was constructed. The high quality of the actors' performance also drew positive appreciation.¹⁵ The serial has become a cult when shown for the first time and remained so up to this day.

Video 1.

The serial was a success in the German Democratic Republic, where it was premiered on 5th January 1979, soon after it was shown in Czechoslovakia late in 1978. It was also bought by the West German TV station Norddeutscher Rundfunk (NDR) from Hamburg in the same year. Norddeutscher Rundfunk used the language version produced in East Germany and reedited the serial into nine out of the original thirteen episodes. It was necessary that the episodes were all had the same length of 58 minutes (episodes differed in length in the Czech version from 46 to 65 minutes, which was a standard practice at that time).¹⁶ Norddeutscher Rundfunk also removed any ideological scenes, which were difficult to understand for Westerners. ČST did not have any objections against this practice, but insisted that the

¹⁴ Jaroslav Dietl (1929-1985) has worked in ČST as a scriptwriter and script editor since 1953. He wrote scripts of series and serials, TV plays, shows, quiz and game shows. Many programs based on his scripts are being rebroadcast. He was a Czechoslovak celebrity in the 1970s and 1980s.

¹⁵ Analysis 'Television and its viewers in 1978,' Archives of Czech Television, Prague, Archive of Programme Funds, Archive fund Inf, Inventory Number 61, Department of Programme and Audience Research.

¹⁶ Šimon Dominik, 'Nemocnice na kraji města. Dvě řady, dvojí politika' (transl. 'Hospital on the Outskirts. Two Series, Double Policy'), in: *Film a dějiny 2* (transl. *Film and History*), Casablanca 2009, p. 342

result was approved by screenwriter Jaroslav Dietl and director Jaroslav Dudek. For ČST, broadcasting in the West meant an important source of foreign currency which Czechoslovakia was short of.

Norddeutscher Rundfunk had far-reaching plans. In the end of 1979, several months before the serial was broadcast in the Federal Republic of Germany, the station expected high ratings based on viewer surveys and became interested in the follow-up serial. ČST accepted the project and Jaroslav Dietl started working on the idea in the first half of 1980. The Germans waited for the ratings that were a deciding factor. The success of the serial became clear in April 1980 when West German ARD broadcast it in prime time from 20.15 pm onwards every Monday and reached 18 to 20 million viewers. This encouraged GDR to finance the follow-up serial.¹⁷ This constituted an exceptional success for a TV serial made in a communist country. Czechoslovakian television was already successful at presenting children's television serials in West Europe.¹⁸ This time it became successful with adult viewers, although the actors starring in the serial were completely unknown to West German viewers.¹⁹ The serial had to attract viewers by its storyline and characters, and was good publicity for ČST. The communist regime could also take satisfaction in the fact that a serial set in the socialist health care system could have success in a capitalist country.

Video 2.

Available documents show that the negotiations conducted before the signing of the co-production contract during the filming of the follow-up serial were quite tough, at least on the side of ČST. Their managers knew well that it was the German party who was primarily interested in the co-production going ahead and were able to take advantage of this fact –finally they managed to succeed with all their requests. The German party committed to invest 2 million German marks in the serial.²⁰ ČST made seven new episodes of the serial in 1981, which were again a great success in the Federal Republic of Germany.

Nemocnice na kraji města was a very successful export together with children's television programs. It was sold to the Soviet Union, Poland, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Cuba. It was also broadcast in Austria, Switzerland, Finland, Cyprus, Australia, China, and Afghanistan.

4 Return Of TV Serials From The Communist Period

After the change of the regime in late 1989, the future of domestic serials production was not clear. It also was not clear at the beginning of the 1990s who will be filming new serials and on which topics. There was a dilemma on how to approach potential rebroadcasting of serials made in the normalization era. In the beginning, Czechoslovak Television (later Czech Television (ČT)) was repeating mainly comedy serials, historical serials and children's programs made in the 1970s and 1980s.²¹ Rebroadcasting of serials set in the contemporary life of that time was discussed, the question was to what degree they would be influenced by the politics of the time. *Nemocnice na kraji města* was not discussed at all, however it was first rebroadcast in 1992. Rebroadcasting serials that contained propaganda started in 1999. That year ČT repeated the serial *Třicet případů majora Zemana* ('Thirty cases of major Zeman'), shot in the 1970s and describing the work of an investigator in the period 1945-1973. Czech Television broadcast the serial using new documents, the purpose of which was to show how the serial was distorting the interpretation of history. The re-broadcasting of this serial provoked the interest of commercial television stations,

17 Documents on negotiations with managers of Norddeutscher Rundfunk, 1980, Archives of Czech Television, Prague, Archive of Programme Funds, Archive Fund Red, Inventory Number 382; see Šimon Dominik, 'Nemocnice na kraji města. Dvě řady, dvojitá politika' (transl. 'Hospital on the Outskirts. Two Series, Double Policy'), in: *Film a dějiny 2* (transl. *Film and History*), Casablanca 2009, p. 330-348

18 See Helena Srubar, *Ambivalenzen des Populären. Pan Tau und Co. Zwischen Ost und West*, UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2008

19 Documents on negotiations with managers of Norddeutscher Rundfunk, 1980, Archives of Czech Television, Prague, Archive of Programme Funds, Archive Fund Red, Inventory Number 382

20 Ibid.

21 Czech Television was established on 1st January 1992, a year before the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. It took over the right to use the archive of programs made by ČST. It is authorized to trade these programs and include the profit in its finances. Commercial television stations were protesting against this practice in the 1990s saying that this is a major advantage for Czech Television to be able to use the archived programmes made under the previous regime.

which started buying the rights to televise old TV series from ČT. The peak viewer ratings of TV serials made in the 1970s and 1980s were in the years 2002 and 2003 when 1.5-2 million viewers watched these serials on the commercial station called Prima.²² Afterwards the ratings dropped, as old TV series were sold on DVDs and could be watched on the internet. Nevertheless, these old serials still have their place in the schedules of commercial television stations and their rebroadcasting is especially successful during the summer holidays.

The public broadcaster Czech Television still repeats old TV serials made in the 1970s and 1980s every week, with, apparently, ratings good enough to justify this practice. However, one cannot explain this interest by arguing that audiences of old TV serials would like to see the former political regime restored. More likely, it is nostalgia for cultural products related to viewers' childhood or youth. Ratings show that young people born after 1989 are not very interested in these serials. So, the viewers are more likely to be people who share the memories of a television programme they watched in the 1970s and 1980s, just as they share the memories of other cultural objects, books, films, not to mention household artefacts. Irena Reifová says that you can interpret the recycling of old television serials in a new social system as crystallization of a new attitude to the old days and a sedimentation of the collective memory.²³ You can find similar nostalgia in other countries of the former Eastern Bloc too. However, in this case nostalgia is closely connected to TV serials in the Czech and Slovak Republics. For example in 2004 Czech television stations broadcast fifteen serials made before 1989 and eighteen TV serials made after 1989; by 2005 the ratio between pre- and post-80 serials was 10:17.

As viewers are so much interested in old TV serials, media companies are profiting from this post-socialist nostalgia.²⁴ Public broadcaster ČT for example, is selling DVDs of TV serials made during the communist regime. These sales are also promoted on the screen. Commercial TV stations are willing to pay large sums to Czech Television for the broadcasting rights of these serials. All this justifies why making follow-ups to successful old TV serials is worth it.

However, it is necessary to mention the economic aspect of the interest in the popular culture of the past. According to Wulf Kansteiner, there are "memory makers" which manipulate the representations of the past. At the same time there are "memory consumers", who feed on, neglect or reshape these artefacts according to their interests.²⁵ Television stations that broadcast old television series can be perceived as "memory makers". Series produced before 1989 represent a significant share of the total number of television series broadcast.

The Centre of Independent Public Opinion Research conducted research in 2007 involving 1000 respondents who were questioned about watching older television series. They were asked about the specific series they watched. A total of 542 (51 %) respondents stated that they watched the *Nemocnice na kraji města* serial before and after 1990. A total of 197 respondents (19 %) answered that they watched the serial up to 1989. On the contrary, 134 people (13 %) stated that they only watched the episodes dated after 1990. Only 17 % of respondents stated that they did not watch the serial at all. Of all the serials that were investigated, only *Nemocnice na kraji města* had the largest number of respondents who watched episodes before and after 1990. For other serials, this percentage ranged between 16 – 38%.²⁶

In the 1990s, only two TV serials were shot as follow-ups of successful old TV serials from the communist regime. These were the serials *Arabela se vrací* (*Arabela Returns*) and *Dobrodružství kriminalistiky* (*Adventure of Criminalistics*) made in co-operation with West German producers in the 1980s and 1990s.²⁷ There was no propaganda in either of these two serials, and therefore there was no problem filming them after 1989.

22 Association of Television Organizations (ATO) was established in 1997. ATO organizes electronic television audience measurement in the Czech Republic using the 'people's meter' method. ATO publishes the results on its website www.ato.cz. The results are also regularly published in *Marketing & Media, Weekly for Media, Marketing and Creativity* by Economia Prague.

23 See Irena Reifová, 'Rerunning and rewatching socialist TV drama serials: post-socialist Czech television audiences between commodification and reclaiming', *Critical Studies in Television*, 4, 2, p. 53-71

24 The results of electronic television audience measurement of ATO from 1997 show a steady audience interest in older TV series, see www.ato.cz and annual reports.

25 See Wulf Kansteiner, 'Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies', *History and Theory*, 41 (2), p. 179-197

26 *Research, Our society 11/2007*, Centre of Independent Public Opinion Research, Prague

27 Children's TV serial *Arabela* was made by ČST in 1980 in co-production with the West German station Westdeutscher Rundfunk. The serial was extremely successful and was sold to many countries around the world. The production of the series *Adventure of criminalistics* started at the end of the 1980s as a co-production of ČST with the West German company Schwarzwaldfilm. Each of the episodes was devoted to the reconstruction of a major case in the history of criminalistics. The first eight episodes ended in 1989.

5 *Nemocnice Na Kraji Města Po Dvaceti letech* (‘Hospital On The Outskirts Twenty Years Later’)

The idea surfaced to film the follow-up serial of *Nemocnice na kraji města*. However, the situation was complicated. The scriptwriter Jaroslav Dietl died in 1985 and the copyrights for the characters were owned by the scriptwriter’s wife Magdalena Dietlová. In the 1990s, the key person to influence the filming of the follow-up serial of *Nemocnice* was Borek Severa, a Czech emigrant living in Germany. Severa told Magdalena Dietlová about his plan to prepare a new production of *Nemocnice* and bought the copyrights from Dietlová in 1997. However, Dietlová included a clause in the sale contract stating that the dramaturgical and directorial supervision of the potential new serial was to be done by Jaroslav Dudek, director of the original *Nemocnice* written by Dietl.²⁸ News appeared in the media in May 1999 about the new serial *Nemocnice* that was to be produced by the commercial television station Nova.²⁹

Jan Otčenášek, who started writing the scripts (his pseudonym as a scriptwriter was Petr Zikmund) had to cope with the fact that some characters were not included in the story anymore because their respective actors had died. The serial was to be made by Czech Independent Television Company (ČNTS), the service organization of Nova television station, which had already been in dispute with the licence holder for Nova broadcasting – a company called CET 21.

Due to this dispute, Nova did not shoot the new series of *Nemocnice*. Jan Otčenášek managed to write six episodes for the Czech Independent Television Company. Borek Severa bought these six scripts from ČNTS when it stopped making programmes for Nova. In December 2000 Severa told the media that the new series would be called *Nemocnice na kraji města po dvaceti letech* (‘Hospital on the Outskirts Twenty Years Later’). Since Jaroslav Dudek died, Ivo Mathé was appointed the new supervisor of the serial, as he was the head of the production team of the first episodes of the original *Nemocnice* serial. Severa made an agreement with Czech Television, which bought the copyright to the first six new episodes of *Nemocnice na kraji města* in February 2001.

When Czech Television decided to make a sequel, they envisaged that this would definitely attract the viewers’ interest, as audiences would want to know the fate of the characters. Therefore, they invested substantial funds in the preparation of the sequel, along with an anticipated large viewer interest that could be used when selling advertising time. Czech Television as a public service broadcaster emphasized that the series would show how the lives of the characters have changed since the 1970s and 1980s and during the post-89 transition period. The series would capture the changes in their personal and professional lives.

In a similar manner, viewers had also undergone life changes after 1989. The creators emphasized that viewers would be able to identify the changes experienced by their favourite heroes with the changes in their own lives. This exceptional “transfer” of characters from the totalitarian regime to the liberal capitalist era was a challenge. The creators also wanted to present many current issues at once, such as: the privatization of healthcare, tabloidization of the media, racism, and corruption. The filming of these episodes under the direction of Hynek Bočan lasted 154 days in 2002. Pieces of news appeared in the media saying that the actors had objections to the scripts. The actors even modified their scripted dialogues, admitted director Bočan.

Several media platforms covered the forthcoming premiere of the new serial *Nemocnice na kraji města po dvaceti letech* (‘Hospital on the Outskirts Twenty Years Later’). First, in the summer of 2003, Czech Television re-broadcast the original twenty episodes of *Nemocnice na kraji města*, written by Dietl. The ratings placed the serial in the top position among the programmes of Czech Television’s Channel 1. As the premiere of the new episodes was approaching the interest of audiences in the serial written by Dietl was increasing. While the ratings for the first episode were 18.2 %,

28 Zuzana Boušková, ‘Nemocnice bude pokračovat’ (transl. ‘Nemocnice will continue’), *Lidové noviny*, 13. 20.12.2000, p. 6

29 Television station Nova started broadcasting on 4th February 1994 as the first national commercial television station in the Czech Republic. It has remained the leader on the Czech television market ever since.

the ratings for the final twentieth episode were as high as 31 % (e.g. 2.6 million viewers).³⁰ Czech Television organized a show of the first episode of *Nemocnice na kraji města* which took place in Prague's multiplex *Slovanský dům* and was prepared in a Hollywood style. Czech Television announced that the costs of the serial had reached 75 million crowns. The minister of culture Pavel Dostál accepted the invitation to be the guest of the show. The film about the serial, a book and a soundtrack were presented upon this occasion. Reactions in the media suggested that the people watching the show were not really enthusiastic about the first episode.

Video 3.

The newspapers carried reviews of the first few episodes before the television premiere of the first episode or soon after. The evaluation of television critics was not very positive. In their opinion, the action of the new *Nemocnice na kraji města* was too slow when compared with American medical TV series broadcast by all television stations. They criticised the quality of the dialogues. They found the transfer of a number of the original characters to the new era questionable. They objected to the way the scriptwriter tried to present various contemporary issues in the serial.

According to the critics, the characters written by Jan Otčenášek were embedded in superficial plots, that had to do, for instance, with racial intolerance (e.g. one of the characters got married to a Gypsy woman who worked as a nurse), unlawful appropriation of property, or the privatization of the hospital. The plot was full of supporting characters that were caricatures of people that were 'typical' for the end of the 1990s.

Nevertheless, Czech Television might have been satisfied with the ratings. The premiere of the first episode broadcast on 20th October had excellent ratings (46.8 %) in the age category 15+, reaching a total of 3,961,000 viewers and an audience share of 77.22 %. The first episode had the highest ratings since the introduction of "people meters" in 1997. Later on, the ratings dropped slightly, however, there were only three episodes that reached less than 3 million viewers. The share did not drop below 60 %. The ratings went up during the last few episodes, with the last episode reaching 3,600,000 viewers. The average ratings for the serial were 38 % (3.3 million viewers) from a total audience share of 67 %. Viewer satisfaction was much worse: the average satisfaction coefficient was 5.8 out of the maximum of 10 points. Most viewers were women. The least frequent viewers were young people of 15 to 24 years old, while viewers older than 65 years were three times more frequent. The highest ratings corresponded to university graduates and people with the highest living standards. The most faithful viewers were people living in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants.³¹

Video 4

When the broadcasting of the serial was coming to its end, the reviews of the serial were often rather ironic when evaluating the plot changes, individual dialogues and scenes:

You can return to the landscape of childhood, but you cannot return to childhood. You can bring back the old *Nemocnice* by re-broadcasting it, but you cannot bring it back to life. The *Hospital* twenty years later had a similar effect as the programme *Stars that are still shining* (*Hvězdy, které nehasnou*): it was a nostalgic resuscitation. Old bones got moving, but they didn't feel much like dancing. And the serial did not succeed in bringing back to life the most important character: Dietl. Czech Television had great commercial success. Nothing more.³²

The serial was commercially successful on the domestic market. Czech television announced that the profit from advertising and sponsoring reached nearly 35 million crowns. When Czech Television joined the project, they assumed that the serial would sell well in foreign countries. The serial was broadcast by the Slovak commercial television station Markíza almost at the same time as Czech Television. It was also bought by the Polish TVP, Hungarian RTL

30 The results of electronic television audience measurement of ATO for *Hospital on the Outskirts* were published in *Marketing & Media*, 2003, p. 22-23

31 Mirka Spáčilová, 'Je nejlepší být koněm v Nemocnici' (transl. 'It is best to be a horse in the Nemocnice'), *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 14, 29.12.2003, part C, p. 9

32 Andrej Halada, 'Nemocnice po 20 letech' (transl. 'Hospital 20 years later'), *Reflex*, 15, 2004, No. 4, p. 47

Club and TVB-92 in Serbia and Montenegro.³³ German-speaking countries were expected to generate the highest profits. However, German television stations were not interested. The rights to televise this serial were eventually bought by the MDR television station in Leipzig, for only 2,500 euro per episode.³⁴

6 *Nemocnice Na Kraji Města – Nové Osudy* ('Hospital On The Outskirts – New Life Stories')

Considering the negative reviews of the serial, which despite good ratings, had low viewer satisfaction and it failed to sell to Western Europe, it was slightly surprising to hear in September 2005 that the producer Borek Severa was preparing a follow-up to *Nemocnice na kraji města*. He approached several authors and finally he chose Lucie Konášová to write the script.

The serial was shot from May 2007 to January 2008 by Czech Television and was directed by Viktor Polesný. The total cost was 86 million crowns (a single episode cost 6.6 million crowns). Czech television broadcast thirteen new episodes of the serial called *Nemocnice na kraji města – nové osudy* ('Hospital on the Outskirts - New Life Stories') from 26th September to 19th December 2008. The ratings were steady around 1,300,000 viewers, which was much less than the preceding serial had achieved. In the meantime, there were two commercial television stations Nova and Prima that broadcast popular Czech television serials set in hospitals. The *Nemocnice* was not so attractive for audiences anymore, especially after their disappointment with *Hospital on the Outskirts Twenty Years Later*.

Video 5

The reviews mostly agreed that the new serial was better than the preceding ones. Konášová's scripts were better than Otčenášek's: the dialogues were more vivid, with a lot of punchlines. Young characters were given more space in the plot, which was a good decision. By making the serial more like a film (quick sequences with more action), director Polesný helped to bring *Nemocnice* closer to foreign medical TV series. There was some criticism against the many storylines involved, which couldn't be properly exploited. The serial consisted of characters written by three different scriptwriters, which made the story complicated: the last episodes were based on characters written by Dietl, however, it also included several characters from *Hospital on the Outskirts Twenty Years Later*. Lucie Konášová made the story even more complicated. First, Konášová left out several important plot-forming characters written by Otčenášek, which made the narrative flow difficult to follow. However, she did include several characters that had been left out by Jan Otčenášek and by Jaroslav Dietl in his second series. Considering all this, one can ask to what extent the new series could be considered a follow-up of the original serial written by Jaroslav Dietl.

7 New Return: *Sanitka* ('Ambulance')

Hospital on the Outskirts was an extremely popular TV serial in the 1970s and 1980s. Viewers had high expectations of the two follow-up series made at the beginning of the 21st century. The follow-up serial had excellent ratings, since the viewers were eager to see the return of the serial's characters. However, audiences were quite disappointed with the quality of the serial. Despite this, Czech Television produced and broadcast another follow-up serial in 2008. The ratings were substantially lower. Viewers and critics agreed that it was better to give up on any future plans for follow-ups of *Nemocnice*. However, nostalgia persisted among audiences and critics who remembered the original twenty

33 Jaroslav Špulák, 'Blažej, Ina a tři miliony věrných' (transl. 'Blažej, Ina and three million of the faithful'), *Právo*, 14, 12.1.2004, p. 13

34 Mirka Spáčilová, 'Nový režisér chce udělat staré postavy silnější' (transl. 'New director will make old characters strong'), *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 17, 27.9.2006, part B, p. 9

episodes written by Jaroslav Dietl as being the best.³⁵

Despite the unsatisfactory results of the follow-up serials, Czech Television decided to try again and revive the characters of a popular TV serial made in the normalization era. *Sanitka 2* ('Ambulance 2'), a follow-up of a popular TV serial *Sanitka* from 1984 about Prague's ambulance services is currently being shot. High ratings are expected again, as viewers will be curious to see how the life stories of the characters would develop. It is questionable whether this serial might not cause the same disappointment among viewers and critics as *Nemocnice na kraji města* did. There are similar potential reasons for this serial to fail. Both the scriptwriter and the director are new. Some characters have been left out because the actors are deceased. It is doubtful how viewers would cope with the fact that the characters will be transferred to a completely different era. While in the 1970s and 1980s *Nemocnice na kraji města* and *Sanitka* were the only two Czech serials set in hospitals, today the two national commercial television stations, Nova and Prima, are broadcasting extremely popular medical series. *Sanitka* will thus, be released in a highly competitive environment. The release date for this serial is planned by Czech television for the autumn of 2013.

Biography

Petr Bednařík has been an assistant lecturer at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism at Charles University since 2001. He has a PhD degree in Media Studies from Charles University. Since 2002, he has also been working at the Institute of Contemporary History of the Academy of Sciences in Czech Republic. His research focuses on Czechoslovak Jews after 1938 and Czech media history in the 20th century.

³⁵ Czech Television, special website about the series, www.ceskatelevize.cz/specialy/nemocnice/serie4/index.html (viewers' forum), Accessed: 20 May 2013;

Mirka Spáčilová, 'Už jsme viděli i horší Nemocnici' (transl. 'We've seen a lot worse Hospital'), *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 19, 26.9.2008, part C, p. 9; Darina Křivánková, 'Z mé nemocnice' (transl. 'From my hospital'), *Reflex*, 19, No. 41, p. 47