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**“Vítání občánků”: Social Analysis of a Czech  
Baby-Welcoming Ceremony**

Master's thesis

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Year of the defence: 2023

## **Declaration**

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on 31. 7. 2023

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## References

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## **Abstract**

Vítání občánků which translates to “Welcoming of Little Citizens” is a rite of passage celebrated by Czech parents with newborns at their local town or city council. It was invented during the Communist era with the aim of replacing baptism. A reason for its continued popularity even after the shift to democracy is its function as a rite of passage at a difficult life situation but also its successful re-invention. Transition to parenthood is difficult in contemporary society due to high societal expectations of parents as well as contradictory ideals. Rite of passage helps ease the transition for the parents, but it also involves the broader community and the newborn. In addition, it puts one’s life journey into a bigger perspective and provides a platform for a family gathering and for using symbolic language. Both its invention and re-invention were done by inducing a sense of continuity via elements invoking past traditions and universal values. Thanks to that, the desired new meanings and values have been accepted by the public. A crucial role in the (re)inventing process has been played by a so-called institutional entrepreneur, an actor who has the skills, resources and motivation to achieve it. Originally, it was the Communist Party who played the part, while in the re-inventing process it has shifted to a more local level. It is typically mayors or clerks from the local council who enable the process with the high interest from the public giving them the needed support. Apart from becoming a local and not anymore state event, it has also managed to diminish its anti-religious overtones and become a platform for (post)modern and post-secular meanings and needs.

## **Abstrakt**

Vítání občánků je přechodový rituál, který byl vynalezen během minulého režimu komunistickou stranou za účelem nahrazení křtů. Na rozdíl od mnohých jiných komunistických vynálezů tento obřad přetrval dodnes, a dokonce se těší vysoké popularitě po celé České republice. Důvodem je jeho funkce jakožto přechodový rituál pro náročnou životní situaci a zároveň i jeho úspěšné znovuvynalezení. Přejchod k rodičovství je v dnešní společnosti náročný kvůli vysokým společenským očekáváním kladeným na rodiče a kvůli protichůdným ideálům. Přechodový rituál usnadňuje tranzici nejen rodičů, ale také novorozence a širší komunity. Dále také umožňuje porozumění vlastní životní dráze a vytváří prostor pro rodinná setkání a pro použití symbolického jazyka. Vynalezení a znovuvynalezení obřadu zkombinovalo prvky, které navozují pocit kontinuity odkazem na starší tradice a univerzální hodnoty. Díky tomu pak byly kýžené nové hodnoty a významy

přijaty veřejností. Zásadní roli v procesu (znovu)vynalezení hrál tzv. institucionální podnikatel (institutional entrepreneur), což je aktér, který k tomu má potřebné schopnosti, zdroje a motivaci. Při původním obřadu tuto roli sehrála komunistická strana, zatímco znovuvynalezení se odehrálo na lokálnější úrovni formou starostů či místních úředníků, přičemž důležitý přitom byl i vysoký zájem veřejnosti. Kromě posunu ze státní na lokální úroveň se také podařilo omezit vnímání obřadu jako proti-náboženské záležitosti a nabídnout prostor pro realizaci (post)moderních a postsekulárních potřeb a významů.

## **Keywords**

rite of passage, reinvented tradition, institutional entrepreneur, Communist tradition, baby-welcoming ceremony, transition to democracy

## **Klíčová slova**

Vítání občánek, přechodový rituál, znovuvynalezená tradice, komunismus

## **Title**

“Vítání občánek”: Social Analysis of a Czech Baby-Welcoming Ceremony

## **Název práce**

Sociologická analýza Vítání občánek

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## List of Abbreviations

<b>Abbr.</b>	<b>Czech name</b>	<b>English translation</b>
VO	Vítání občánků	Welcoming of Little Citizens
SPOZ	Sbor pro občanské záležitosti	Committee for Civil Issues
MNV	Místní národní výbor	Local National Committee
NF	Národní fronta	National Front

# 1. Introduction

In Czechia, many new parents choose to celebrate their child's birth at the townhall with the mayor. While child-welcoming ceremonies can be found in just about all cultures, presence of local politicians in them is rather unusual. This event, called "Vítání občánků" ("Welcoming of Little Citizens", further on abbreviated as VO) was introduced by the Communist Party as a means of suppressing the influence of the Catholic Church and of gaining more control over the society. New Communist-approved events, objects and phrases were established all over the Soviet sphere of influence although with varying levels of success. While the popularity of religion has diminished in the Czech regions over the past century, it has not been annihilated completely. Both during the Communist period and nowadays, Catholic baptisms continue to be carried out at significant rates. Simultaneously, Vítání občánků has taken root so much so that it is still being practiced today in numerous municipalities all across the country.

This persisting popularity of a formerly Communist affair is not a matter of course. Many such events, words and objects are being rejected by the contemporary society due to the associations with the past. For instance, the International Women's Day which during the Communist era served a tool of propaganda to reinforce gender inequality is still seen unfavourably by much of society. When its recognition as a commemorative holiday was required by the European Union upon the Czech Republic's admission, it spurred many heated debates and was perceived as a highly controversial request (Kapusta-Pofahl, 2011). Many other affairs have ceased to be practiced at all or are only used in a reference to the past. Vítání občánků has, however, managed to survive and even undergo a rebirth of a sort.

Vítání občánků is organized by municipalities for newborn children and their parents who reside there. It has a formal character, but it is not officially binding in any way. During the short ceremony, the attendees, which may also include other family members and friends, gather at the townhall or another representative location. The attendance may be quite high as there are usually multiple newborns and their families welcomed at the same time despite the fact that they may not know each other. The series of rituals which take place typically includes a speech by the mayor, a performance by little children or professional musicians, presents from the council to the child and the parents, signing a commemorative book and taking photos of the newborn in a historical cradle. Each municipality adjusts the ceremony

to their conditions, and some have even added new rituals, such as a celebratory drink or a theatre performance. Some places also offer a follow-up event where trees are planted for each newborn which has a less formal character. This along with the fact of its continued persistence shows that the event is well alive and thriving even though it is rarely ever talked about.

In this thesis I will explore the ways in which the event was and is performed and how it changed between the two different eras of its existence. I will also try to draw an explanation for its popularity from the perspective of various actors. There are several interested parties which take part in it, including parents, local organizers and the state. The study of *Vítání občánek* may uncover what the priorities of these actors are in the context of childbirth and how these actors act and rationalize their behaviour. I will draw on the theories of rites of passage, (re)invented tradition and institutional entrepreneurship to find an explanation to the appeal of the ceremony in contemporary Czechia.

In the following subchapters I will first provide some political and historical context to the object of investigation and secondly, I will discuss the use of terminology regarding the ceremonial aspect of *Vítání občánek*.

## **1.1 Object of Investigation in Context**

The origins of *Vítání občánek* can be traced to the mid-1950s (Knapík, Franc, 2011: 1020). Its purpose was to substitute baptism and so its existence was defined by its anti-religious overtones (Státník, 2016: 43). Attempts to introduce new secular, Communist ceremonies were already made in the USSR in the 1920s and 30s albeit unsuccessfully (McDowell, 1974: 267). In the 1950s, however, there was a new wave of anti-religious campaign throughout the whole Soviet sphere as Nikita Khrushchev assumed leadership (Petkūnas, 2013: 93) It must be acknowledged that even in the West, religion was commonly seen through the lens of the theory of secularisation. It claims that industrialization and modernization go hand in hand with increasing secularisation, that is the decline of the significance and popularity of religion (Hanson, 1997, Lauwers, 1973; Martin, 1969). While secularization was a substantive process in all of Europe, in Communist countries it was an intentional political strategy of the leading party (Havlíček, 2020: 16; Minarik, 2022: 220; Powell, 1967; Václavík, 2007: 480).

There were two types of civil ceremonial rites introduced in the Soviet Union (and its satellites). Firstly, there were private ceremonies related to birth, death, marriage and so on, and secondly, public ceremonies and holidays which commemorated important dates of the Communist history and/or important values (McDowell, 1974: 265). The so-called “private ceremonies” were being established in an attempt to link the individual and the Communist state in a most intimate manner. Unlike public holidays and festivities, private ceremonies were overall not accepted by the public too smoothly with many still resorting to religion in these moments instead. (ibid.: 272.) Particularly in the countryside did people hold onto the traditional (and) religious rites (Navrátilová, 1984).

The organization of the new, Communist events was delegated to local Committees for Civil Issues (*Sbory pro občanské záležitosti*, further on referred to as “SPOZ”). These committees were being established from the second half of the 1950s on and their task was to consolidate the Communist spirit through events and activities of a cultural, educational and social character. One of the main purposes of their origin was to disrupt and substitute traditional religious ceremonies, including baptisms, marriages and funerals. (Knapík, Franc, 2011: 806-807) Committees for Civil Issues were departments of the Local National Committee (*Místní národní výbor*, further on referred to as Local Committee or National Committee) which was the name for municipal councils. The contemporary role of a mayor was fulfilled by a chairman of the Local Committee. Although the Local Committee, including the chairman, were officially installed through elections, in practice all was controlled by the Communist Party. It was a “participatory dictatorship” in which the execution of power was often not limited officially through laws but through stringent norms and procedures which reduced the scope for personal choice of most seemingly powerful members of the Party (Sabrow et al., 2012: 199). Elections at the time were neither free nor competitive due to many restraints, such as no right to free speech, media and assembly, no alternative choice to the one approved list of candidates and falsifications of election results (Charvát, 2010). All allowed parties and social organizations were united into the National Front (Národní fronta), a Communist organization which put together the list of candidates.

The Communist regime lasted in Czechoslovakia from 1948 to 1989. As a satellite of the Soviet Union, the country followed its lead in many ways including the aforementioned anti-religious campaign. At the same time, although the empire proclaimed total unity, regional context often manifested itself affecting the resulting level of secularization. Attitudes of

countries also changed throughout the era. In Czechoslovakia, extremely oppressive fifties were followed by a period of liberalization at the end of sixties, also known as the “Prague Spring”, which was then however violently suppressed. In the seventies, in an effort to re-seize control of the society and prevent other attempts of emancipation, the Communist Party began a period of the so-called “normalization” which meant a new wave of restrictions and purposeful propaganda. The regime began to wane in the 80s and resulted in the so-called “Velvet Revolution” in 1989 which is the symbol of the end of the Communist period in Czechoslovakia. Afterwards, a complex period of transition to democracy ensued, with the most radical changes happening in the 90s and early 2000s. Apart from re-orienting themselves to the West including their admission to the NATO and the European Union, the now-divorced countries of the Czech Republic and Slovakia endeavoured to embrace capitalism, free democracy and values of humanism.

## 1.2 Terminology

When discussing *Vítání občánků*, various notions come to mind – it may be described as a tradition, ceremony, ritual, custom, a part of folklore or culture. The difficulty in finding the right term stems not only from the atypical nature of *Vítání občánků*, but also from the ambiguity of the aforesaid terms. Each of them has been defined and understood in many ways, so it is necessary to first clarify how they will be used in this thesis.

Firstly, *Vítání občánků* may be described both as a ceremony and a ritual. Ceremony represents “an activity that is infused with ritual significance, performed on a special occasion” (Rai, 2010: 288). Its form is typically elaborate and stylized. (Pickering, 1974: 75). On the other hand, ritual refers to “the prescribed order of performing ceremonial acts” (Rai, 2010: 288). Even though the phrase “prescribed order” may give the impression that it is a set practice which allows for no agency, it is not the case. For instance, Nijhawan identified up to three levels of reflexivity that may be distinguished when it comes to rituals – the actors’ “stance toward the ritual as such”, “the organization form of ritual action” and “the cultural schemes that structure ritual processes” (2006: 174).

While analogous ceremonies may be found all over the world, in many respects *Vítání občánků* is unique to the Czech Republic and its culture. Culture is a complex, multi-layered concept which comprises “(1) *ideas, knowledge (...)*, and *recipes* for doing things; (2) humanly fabricated *tools (...)*; and (3) the *products* of social action (...)” (Hall et al., 2003:

7, italics in the original). Culture is not fixed, rather, it constantly evolves together with society. Hence it is susceptible to the environment, development and advancement of the society, including the rise and fall of religion, or technology (Rasak, 2010: 10-11). We may even come across examples of accumulated culture which is the result of newly invented, discovered or borrowed elements being added to present culture, or in other words the process of cultural growth (ibid.: 7).

Furthermore, both tradition and custom are equally pertinent when discussing Vítání občanů. The theory of tradition in particular has experienced a boom since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century chiefly due to globalization which brought about clashes between cultural and religious traditions (Wiedenhofer, 2016: 11). While traditions are characterized by invariance and their practices are thus typically fixed and formalized, custom is open to innovation and change. (Hobsbawm, 2012: 2-3) In other words, custom is what people do whereas tradition encompasses the formal and ritualized practices and equipment which surround the custom (ibid.). Therefore, they are interlinked and can be both identified in the ceremony. Siegfried Wiedenhofer warns against using a one-sided, narrowed understanding of tradition, postulating that reflections upon the notion of tradition should “take into account its integrity, complexity, historicity, sociality, reflexivity, transcendentality and dialectics” (2016: 11, translated from Czech). He even proposes a modern, complex concept of tradition which combines both the forms and processes of culture and cultural transmission, namely that of a tradition as a historical-social mediation of culture (ibid.: 12-13). In her historical overview, Dorothy Noyes identified three existing usages, namely of tradition as a communicative transaction, tradition as temporal ideology, tradition as communal property, and proposed adding a fourth perspective which would see tradition as a transfer of responsibility (Noyes, 2009).

Unlike the other terms that I have discussed so far, folklore seems to be the least suitable one when describing Vítání občanů. Yet, it would not do to simply reject it as the definitions of folklore are as varied and broad as possibly imaginable with some folklorists even calling for no definition at all (Welsch, 1968). Even though the literal definition of folklore limits it only to oral transmissions of knowledge, beliefs, practices etc., it is often applied to both intangible and tangible forms of traditional expressions (Hussein et al., 2011: 164). In a similar vein, arguing for a practice-based framework, Bronner suggests defining folklore as “traditional knowledge drawn from or put into practice”(2016: 22) On the other hand, Ben-

Amos proposes a simple definition that “folklore is artistic communication in small groups” in which he intentionally omits the criteria of tradition and oral transmission (1971: 13). A completely different way to define folklore is for it to meet the criteria of being “(1) *traditional*, (2) *reworked by fantasy*, and (3) *truly folk* (Krohn et al., 1971: 26, italics in original). Others have approached it by contrasting folklore as “the culture of the people” with the culture of official institutions (Dorson, 2005 [1968]), or by way of a tripartite model comprised of folk culture, mass culture and high culture (Testa, 2021: 7).

A common association with folklore is its authenticity, however this is not so simple either. Much seemingly authentic folklore was politically construed typically in the era of modernization and Romantic nationalist movements in order to legitimize political goals. (Bendix, 2009: 7). This was a significant device used by the Czech re-naissance movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which succeeded in establishing the basis of modern Czech nation and culture (Janeček, 2016: 154). Another issue altogether is that folklore’s (supposed) authenticity grants it a market value which, eventually, leads to the (perceived) loss of authenticity (Bendix, 2009: 8-9). Determining if something is (not) a part of folklore by its authenticity is thus a very volatile criterium albeit very popular.

Yet it cannot be denied that *Vítání občánek* is not a clear example of folklore and for many this would be a completely inaccurate usage altogether. Organized by municipalities and originally invented by the political regime pursuing its agenda, it lacks the feeling of “authenticity” and cannot be considered “truly folk” or part of an artistic subculture. On the other hand, it involves many folk elements, such as performances of popular songs, and in reality, it is not just a product of the establishment but also of the participants involved who have shaped it with their creativity and earnest involvement. It is not a coincidence that the idea of an invented tradition, which I will be using to explain the case of *Vítání občánek*, was coined by Eric Hobsbawm at the very time when the German cultural studies were in the midst of a heated debate on how to settle the tensions between tradition and modernity with regards to folklorism (or culture) (Post, 1996: 89). For the aforementioned reasons, in some of the analysed data, despite not being considered an example of folklore *per se*, *Vítání občánek* may sometimes be treated as such and throughout this thesis, academic literature on folklore may be used to explain some aspects of *Vítání občánek*.



## 2. Rite of Passage

The nature of *Vítání občánek* reflects the fact that it is aimed at welcoming newborns into society. The focus, apparent from its very name, is thus to accept and welcome the existence of a new person and celebrate their affiliation with the community. However, it does not concern solely the wider community's perspective. It is also an opportunity for the newborn, its parents and relatives to celebrate an important moment in life and symbolically (re)integrate themselves into the society with their newly-gained identities. It has already been said that a ritual refers to the order in which ceremonial acts are performed. In the case of *Vítání občánek*, we can expect it to follow the paradigm of rites of passage. In this section, I will discuss firstly the theory of the rites of passage and then show how it applies to the particular passages undergone by the newborn, parents and wider community.

### 2.1 Rituals and Ritualisation

Just like tradition or culture, ritual is a commonly used and understood term both in the academic and popular sphere. It has featured in the research conducted by many important anthropologists, sociologists and other social scientists, including Durkheim, van Gennep, Turner, and others. Yet when attempting to define ritual, many problems arise. For instance, it has been noted that the definition Victor Turner created<sup>1</sup> based on his studies of tribal people does not automatically apply to many other instances and societies and, as a result, he himself would often have to forsake it and resort to focusing on “liminality” instead (Alexander, 1991: 13-26). The major problems in his definition were the criteria of supernatural beliefs, which are not applicable to modern secular and non-theist societies, and of formalization, which does not allow for spontaneity and improvisation (ibid.).

Catherine Bell showed that patterns, features and functions identified in a ritual are so diverse and universal that one ends up studying virtually all human activity (1992: 69-74). Similarly, Don Handelman found that attempts to determine universal attributes of rituals result in no or at best “banal” suggestions (2006). For this reason, they chose to approach its study in a more indirect way. Bell resorted to employing the term ‘ritualisation’ which highlights how certain social actions are strategically designed and performed in a way that

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<sup>1</sup> For Victor Turner, rituals are multivocal symbols which have the properties of condensation, unification of disparate referents and polarization of meaning (1997 [1969]: 52).

distinguishes them from more quotidian activities (1992.: 74). Handelman preferred to use the term “public event” and instead of examining what it *is*, he focused on what it *does*, and on the phenomenology of the “forming of form” (2006).

Quack and Töbelmann recently theorized that the study of rituals is for a large part a tacit study of ritual efficacy. They suggested that acknowledging this notion openly and asking specific questions about it may help unfold complex theories of rituals, such as that of Catherine Bell, Émile Durkheim and others. (2010) Bell herself however preferred to consider power the essential aspect of rituals with ritualisation being “first and foremost a strategy for the construction for certain types of power relationships” (1992: 197) based in “domination, consent and resistance” (ibid.: 206). She emphasized that there are two dimensions to the ritual construction of power: that of its production and reception. It is not only the producing agent who is empowered but also the participants who may choose to consent, resist or negotiate appropriation (ibid.: 1992: 207)

Others, like Testa or Handelman, considered social power and rituals’ relationship to social order to be unsatisfactory in providing explanation for ritual(ity) (Handelman, Lindquist, 2005: 16, 213; Testa, 2023b). Instead, their attention is turned towards symbolicity. While all actions are symbolic, the symbolic density and intensity (“quotient of symbolicity”) is higher in the case of rituals (ritualised/ritualising action). (Testa, 2023b) Handelman speaks of curvature from the sociocultural surround which increases along with the growing self-organising, self-forming and auto-poietic capacity of a ritual. This gradation explains the difficulty in finding a universal definition for all rituals. While some rituals are “lineal” and hardly distinguishable from its surround, the most complex forms become almost autonomous and, thus, suitable for an examination in (imaginary) isolation. (Handelman, Lindquist, 2005: 10-16, 27-28) The first extreme represents rituals which reflect society whereas the latter one those which transform it (Handelman, 2006). However, when studying ritual, Handelman suggests that one should first free it from its wider sociocultural field and only re-inserted after its analysis (Handelman, Lindquist, 2005: 3-4). Others however emphasize rituals’ interconnectedness with their sociocultural context as socially relevant elements that are included, excluded, or amplified (Testa, 2023b).

## 2.2 Rite of Passage

Arnold van Gennep noted that there exists a type of rituals which he called the rites of passage (*rites de passage*) and whose objective is to allow an individual as well as the whole society to pass from one determined situation to another equally determined situation (van Gennep, 1981 [1909]:13). Or, in Victor Turner's interpretation, in which people "are released from structure into *communitas* only to return to structure revitalized by their experience of *communitas*" (Turner, 1997 [1969]: 129). According to Turner, these two notions stand in juxtaposition and mutuality since structures are characteristically norm-governed, institutionalized, hierarchized, while *communitas* are unstructured, spontaneous and carry the universal value of "humankindness". (ibid., esp. p. 95-97 and 125-130). Rituals are well-suited to assist with this as one of their fundamental functions is to control behaviour by defining and assigning social roles while demanding and encouraging both the assignees and others to respect these roles (Miller, 2005: 1187). Such a passage then causes the "profane" and the "sacred" worlds to undergo a series of actions and reactions which, if unregulated, could destabilize and harm the society (van Gennep, 1981 [1909]: 13). The purpose of the rites of passage is therefore to let us bridge the profane and the sacred world securely.

However, Van Gennep does not consider „the sacred“ to be an absolute value. In fact, he talks about the „*pivotement*“ of the sacred relatively to what situation we find ourselves in (van Gennep, 1981 [1909]: 21). It has an (auto)kinetic character which gives the semblance of stillness but in reality is made up of movements (Hochner, 2018: 305). As it is pivoting, the two opposite movements need to be separated by a dead point (*un point mort*) (van Gennep, 1981 [1909]: 184). In other words, when one passes from the profane world to the sacred, it is done via a *marge* which is sacred for everyone (ibid.: 28). For van Gennep, social order is dynamic and in a state of "constantly renegotiated balance" and the function of the rites of passage is to serve as a source of regeneration toward re-equilibrium (Hochner, 2018: 308). This would mean that in addition to letting us measuredly undergo the passage, they also function as a source of the social motion, or "*social kinesis*" as Nicole Hochner calls it, which seems to be inspired by Henri Bergson's *élan vital* (ibid.: 300, 306).

Van Gennep's concern was primarily with the form, not the content, of the rituals which allowed him to identify a tripartite structure (Hockey, 2002). A rite of passage thus consists of three phases which are made up of the following rituals: preliminal (separation), liminal

(threshold) and postliminal (aggregation)<sup>2</sup> (Hockey, 2002: 212; Rothem, 2018: 314; van Gennep, 1981 [1909]). The first type of rituals serves to facilitate the separation from the previous world, the second one corresponds to the *point mort* and the last one lets us join the new world (van Gennep, 1981 [1909]: 30). During the liminal period, preliminary and postliminal attributes are (completely or almost completely) stripped off (Turner, 1997 [1969]: 94, 102). In some cases, the liminal period is so developed that it becomes autonomous and we can observe a doubling (*dédoublement*) of the scheme (van Gennep, 1981 [1909]: 20).

Each society creates its own scheme (*schéma*), an assortment and sequence of rites that its member follows, and thus also its own rhythm (Hochner, 2018: 308-309). However, the three types of rituals are not always employed to the same extent, but rather proportionately to the needs of the occasion (van Gennep, 1981 [1909]: 20). In the case of Vítání občánků, we can anticipate that the basis of the ceremony will be the rituals of aggregation.

### 2.3 Rite of Passage of a Newborn

As will be discussed in the following sub-chapters, rituals surrounding a newborn function as rites of passage for all its surrounding community. But, above all, it is the newborn child who undergoes its first passage – birth. In addition to physically coming into existence, it also assumes a variety of new identities, which may include that of a member of its family, a godchild, a resident, or a citizen. While it does not understand any of this, yet, and will not remember the first years of its life, these are nonetheless fundamental facts that will shape his or her life. From the perspective of the theory of rites of passage, it is one of the sequence of rites that we go through. And although we do not remember it directly, it lets us understand ourselves in relation to society. It creates a break in the continuous process of our life through which we can understand our development as a person in society (Pedersen, 1994: 28).

Historically in the Czech lands, an array of rituals was being performed before, during and after the birth of a child, mostly by the mother and the midwife, but also the father, siblings, godparents, the priest, neighbours and others (Bartoš et al., 1951: 13-16; Čečetka, 1900: 9-14; Langhammerová, 2017: 15-21; Motlová, 2016: 116-120; Navrátilová, Verner, 2004;

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<sup>2</sup> In the French original *les rites préliminaires (séparation)*, *liminaires (marge)* and *postliminaires (agrégation)* (van Gennep, 1981 [1909]: 20). The translations into English vary, I am using here a combination of translations by Hockey (2002) and Rothem (2018).

Vojancová et al., 1995: 14-21). Nowadays, the traditional rituals performed in connection with pregnancy and birth have significantly decreased in number, perhaps making way for new ones. It is no longer common for people to guess the newborn's future or character based on its physical appearance or behaviour in its first days of life nor to attempt to influence its future through symbolic actions, the way people used to. Equally, the conduct of expectant mothers is not anymore regulated by folk beliefs, though perhaps this role has been assumed by medical expertise, but also handbooks, coaches and advice on the internet.

The ceremonies performed nowadays which could be considered rites of passage concern various aspects of the child's life, such as its admission into a religion or its purification. Cleansing rites often contain a spiritual dimension and thus these two are often interconnected (Obladen, 2017). In the case of the Roman Catholic Church, which is, or rather was until not so long ago, the dominant religious institution in the Czech Republic, it is baptism which fulfils this role. In recent years, the number of Catholic baptisms performed annually has been slightly over 20 000, with an obvious decline during the two pandemic years (Chytil, Pulkrábková, 2022). As of 2018, the Church declares that a staggering 4.5 million people have been baptized overall (Chytil, 2022). Yet less than 1.4 million people reported having religious faith with only about a half of those claiming allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church (CZSO, 2022a). Moreover, for people under 30 years of age, the yearly number of self-declared Roman Catholics is only around 5000 (ibid.). The majority of those who have been baptised thus do not seem to practice or associate themselves with the Church which allows for the question of why people still insist on performing the baptism in such, relatively, high numbers.

Officially, the purposes of baptism are “(1) to eliminate original sin, (2) to ensure the soul's resurrection after death, and (3) accepting the infant in the church“ (Obladen, 2017: 320). However, considering the census figures, one cannot be sure whether these are truly the motivations of the parents who have their child baptised. It is possible that they merely did not care to fill out the census truthfully or that the discrepancy is caused by a methodological failure. Other explanations may hold that the parents only let the child be baptised to appease the grandparents, to open the door of the Church for the child in case it eventually becomes a believer or to simply follow a tradition that has been done for ages. However, another possibility is that they see baptism as a meaningful rite of passage even if they do not follow the Catholic teachings. Much European clergy has noted a similar tendency already 50 years

ago: they reported that while their services continue to be sought out by the majority of the population on occasions which function as rites of passage (birth, marriage, death), the regular attendance on Sundays had declined (Pickering, 1974: 63).

Another prevalent type of rites of passage concerning the birth of a child are name-giving ceremonies. Names are a powerful symbol and instrument and as such the act of naming a child may be regarded as a way of incorporating the child into the community, as the beginning of a new phase in its life or spiritual journey and even as an exercise of authority over the child (Kanu, 2019: 43-44). In some cultures, names may also be expected to affect or predict its future, reflect its (and/or its family's) life story and the values of the society (ibid.; Rasak, 2010). While *Vítání občánků* is not a name-giving ceremony, analogous events in other formerly Communist countries, such as the Baltics, were of this kind (Paukštytė-Šaknienė, 2007; Petkūnas, 2013, Salo, 1973: 33).

## **2.4 Rite of Passage for the Parents**

While the centre of attention is naturally put on the newborn, its parents' perspective is equally important. And thus, despite its name focusing entirely on the "little citizen", it is pertinent to include the parents' experience of *Vítání občánků* in the analysis. It is them, after all, who decide to attend the ceremony and it is them, who (along with the child) are affected by the birth the most. In fact, the radical transition to motherhood causes many women to experience "fractured identities" due to the need to redefine their sense of the self by incorporating the child into it (Laney et al., 2015). The process of "mother-becoming", also called "matrescence", affects not only her identity and emotional state but also involves changes that occur in a woman's physical state, status within her group and relationship with others as well as daily activities (Raphael, 1975: 66). However, where women's transition to motherhood is typically more defined and structured both by the direct physiological changes of her body and the diligent supervision by medical science, men are in a less clear position. In addition to the inability to experience pregnancy and labour directly, their involvement and role as a father(-to-be) has changed drastically, reinforcing the ambiguity and feelings of unease, isolation, redundancy, marginality and vulnerability (Draper, 2003). In addition, the last decades have seen a rise of new family models which do not follow the traditional norms, such as homo-parental, unmarried, single-parent or patchwork families or the so-called "sandwich generation" (e.g. Dudová, Vohlídalová, 2005; Hasmanová Marhánková, 2011; Kuchařová, Nešporová, 2017; Nešporová, 2022, Palonciová et al.,

2019, Sloboda, 2021; Vítěčková, Klímová Chaloupková, 2014). This is likely to intensify the sense of unease during the already difficult period as they face additional struggles due to unsuitable laws, feelings of exclusion and the lack of set norms which could be followed.

With the rise of neoliberal values, such as self-enhancement, individualism and personal responsibility a new way of parenting was formed, called “intensive mothering” or “intensive parenting”, according to which a good upbringing of a child requires intensive care and incessant accessibility from the parent (Wall, 2004). This concept includes the ideas that children must be cognitively stimulated by parents and that their needs must be prioritized, that parenting is difficult, yet fulfilling and that it is the domain of women (Liss et al., 2013). In the 1990s, the field of developmental psychology saw the emergence of “new brain research” which asserted that a child’s brain capacity is enhanced by early education and stimulation and thus rapidly increased pressure on parents (Wall, 2004). In addition to the intensive care for the child, parents are faced with contradictory expectations of fulfilling one’s own individual needs in other spheres of their lives which is however difficult to achieve and leads to increased stress and feelings of guilt and inadequacy (Guendouzi, 2006). This trend has already been observed in the Czech Republic, as well, with intensive mothering being practiced more by mothers who live in bigger cities and have higher degrees (Nešporová et al., 2019; Pavlicová, 2016).

The significance of its consequences for Czech mothers<sup>3</sup> is further enhanced by the legal and cultural conditions in the Czech Republic. The parental leave in Czechia is unusually long, typically lasting 3 years, during which the stay-at-home mother is expected to fully devote herself to parenting. This sentiment is furthered by the notable lack of options of flexible employment and institutional childcare for the youngest children. (e.g. Křížková, 2002; Křížková, Vohlídalová, 2009; Kuchařová, Nešporová, 2020) This value of primary care was embraced by the Czechs during the transition to democracy as a reaction to the Communist suppression of maternity (Marková Volejníčková, 2018: 108-110). At the same time, neoliberal values and opportunities of self-fulfilment were also embraced which was immediately manifested by a sharp decline in fertility and natality, increase in the age of first-time mothers and the number of children born out of marriage (Eurydice, 2022). While

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<sup>3</sup> I am using a gendered term ‘mothers’ since it is still mostly them who stay at home with the child and thus are affected by its arrival the most. For instance, in 2020, 98 % of parental allowance recipients were women (MPSV, 2021).

the pre-family behaviour as well as the plans and ideals of post-Communist generations are notably shaped by the Western values, when it comes to the reality of parenthood, they continue to fall back into the conventional model of rigid gender roles as mothers-caregivers and fathers-breadwinners (Křížková, 2002; Nešporová et al., 2019).

Raphael notes that while it is true that matrescence may be defined strictly in the physiological sense of birthing a live baby, the cultural and social understandings allow for more variability (1975: 66). It can range from the moment pregnancy is detected, to the child turning several months or years old, sometimes it relates to certain events, such as weaning or cutting the cord, and sometimes it is not recognized at all if the child is a daughter (ibid.: 66-67). Therefore, even though *Vítání občánek* typically takes place several months after the child is born, it is not amiss to consider it as a rite of passage with regards to the birth and newly gained parenthood. Státník presumes that what has made *Vítání občánek* so desirable, in the past as well as in the present, is its symbolic legacy of the traditional (re)introduction of new mothers into society (2016: 42). This coincides with a function of the aggregation phase of rites of passage of “aggregating strangers within”, that is reintegrating those who already are members of the society (Rothem, 2018: 322-323).

No wonder then that there exist plenty of rites of passage which facilitate the transition to parenthood. Many rituals, which at the first glance may seem to revolve solely around the child but in reality function as rites of passage for the parents, have already been identified in scholarly literature. Some of them are closely tied to the pregnancy and birth, be it baby showers (Fischer, Gainer, 1993; Motswapong et al., 2017), or for instance studies on pregnancy and birth from the standpoint of the new mother (Jacinto, Buckey, 2013; Houston, 1999; Raphael, 1975) or father (Jacinto, Molina, 2016). In many cultures, a variety of rituals, including organized support, diet and activity restrictions, and hygiene practices, are observed during the postpartum period with the aim to secure a good physical and psychological recovery, support good breastfeeding, or comply with the local religious or supernatural beliefs (Dennis et al., 2007). However, in addition to all that they also “facilitate role transition for the new mother and extended family members, often rewarding the status of the new mother” (ibid.: 498). Using Van Gennep’s theory to study baby showers, Fischer and Gainer discerned several forms which the tradition takes on nowadays (feminist, traditional etc.) as well as inner conflicts which the participants experience (collision between their private and public life, gendered experiences etc.) (1993). The theory thus not



only explains the order and function of the rituals, it also allows us to gain insight into the transformations it undertakes and the perceptions and current needs of the participants, both of which is affected by the contemporary social conditions.

## **2.5 Rite of Passage for the Broader Community**

It has been discussed that rituals which are centred around a newborn may in fact also function as rites of passage for the parents. What differentiates rites of passage from many other rituals is, however, the expected involvement of the whole local community, including more distant relatives, friends, neighbours or acquaintances (Pence, 1998; Pickering, 1974: 76). It supplies a ceremonial gathering place where the extended family and friends may incorporate the newborn into the community and society, initiate the parents into their new social status and also express the intention to assist them in the child rearing (Neville, 1994: 13). Their presence is often desired so much so that their absence can make the rite feel incomplete and “poorer” (Pickering, 1974: 76). Some members’ role may even be absolutely indispensable, such as that of a godparent in baptism.

From the community’s perspective, the arrival of a new member may cause feelings of existentialist and spiritual ambiguity and uncertainty (Wojtkowiak, 2020). Their relationship with the parents is changed, they have to assume new roles with regards to the newborn and in addition to that, they are reminded of the scheme of rites and their own journey through life. This is above all the case for the new grandparents, who play a special role in the life of the child as well as the new parents and for whom this new status typically signifies their own transition into a later life stage. Grandfathers, in particular, seem to have difficulties with initially assuming their new roles which is reflected in an increase in depression after the birth of the (first) grandchild (Condon, Luszcz, McKee, 2018: 341). Transition to grandparenthood is defined by its countertransitional nature meaning that it is not self-initiated but dependent on other people’s actions (Hagestad, Lang, 1986: 116). Having no say in the birth of a new descendant while being “forced” to become a grandparent may thus be difficult to accept, especially for younger grandparents who are still in their prime and do not appreciate the connotation of oldness that comes with the role. Yet, grandmothers are more likely to show an increase in anxiety before the birth and its rapid improvement afterwards, possibly caused by their projection of their own experiences with childbirth into it rather than by the fear of being a grandmother (Condon, Luszcz, McKee, 2018: 341).

Navrátilová and Verner differentiate between two functional types of rituals pertaining to the birth of a child: firstly, there are those which secure good health of the mother and the newborn and a good life for the child, secondly, they identify those which are integrative from a religious and a social-legal perspective (2004: 21-22). „Vítání občánků“ could be considered as part of the latter category. This is indicated already by its name (Welcoming of Little Citizens). The state citizenship is automatically awarded to children born to a Czech parent in the Czech Republic on the day of birth (§ 4 of Act no. 186/2013 Sb.). In a literal reading of the ceremony, the socio-legal perspective of the country gaining new citizens could be expected to dominate. However, becoming a citizen is, in contemporary Czechia, often associated with turning 15 years old as at this age, any citizen is required by law to hold an identity card (§ 3 of Act no. 269/2021 Sb.). In the past, the occasion of obtaining an identity card was done collectively by way of ceremony during which representatives of the municipality ceremoniously presented the 15-year-olds with their first IDs (Knapík, Franc, 2011: 806-807). This is not done anymore and many choose to acquire their ID earlier in order to travel abroad, yet this cultural association persists. The diminutive “občánek” (little citizen) may thus contain this reference underlining the fact that it is somebody who can be expected to eventually grow into a fully-fledged citizen but at the moment it is primarily a child who needs to be treated as such.

The municipalities as well as the state are expected to play a significant part in supporting the parents and assuring suitable circumstances for raising a child. Apart from paying out parental allowance and constituting laws which protect children’s and parents’ rights, they also provide childcaring establishments and are responsible for urban planning. That is significant for the young families not only because of the much-discussed problems with affordable housing but also because of needing a suitable family-friendly environment in which a child may be raised. The event of Vítání občánků thus may be an opportunity for the municipality to symbolically reassure the new families that their existence, needs and concerns are being considered.

The significance of the arrival of a new citizen as well as a new resident of a village, town or city is heightened in the Czech Republic due to the dismal demographic processes taking place. The decline in natality, and consequent ageing of the population are long-standing and much-discussed problems both in the contemporary Czech Republic and its predecessor Czechoslovakia. This unfavourable tendency was already evident in the first years of the

Communist rule which began in 1948. The post-second world war baby boom peaked in 1947, and the subsequent decline of birth-rate was accelerated by the negative circumstances and consequences of the new political regime, such as emigration, imprisonments, executions, the problematic monetary reform of 1953 as well as the high employment rate of women combined with the lack of nurseries and other supportive infrastructure (Kučera, 2008: 230-232). Total fertility rate dropped from 3,05 children per mother in 1947 and around 2,8 in 1950 to just 2,11 in 1960 (CZSO, 2022b). In the 1970s a series of radical steps was undertaken by the government with the aim of reversing this development which resulted in one plentiful generation. Since the 1980s the declining trend was however reinstated and even further reinforced in the 1990s as the newly-achieved democratic regime opened up new opportunities for self-actualisation. (Hasmanová Marhánková, 2014; Kučera, 2008: 233-237; Křest'ánová, 2016; Stašová, 2018).

The lowest point was reached in 1999 when the total fertility rate was a mere 1,13 children per mother (CZSO, 2022b). We have seen an improvement since then and in the last few years, it has been around 1,7-1,8. (ibid.). However, the rate is still lower than necessary for the population to keep “restoring” itself and thus we can often hear the claim that the Czech population is dying out. In addition to that, the high life expectancy combined with the larger elderly generations caused by the baby-booms of 1940s and 1970s have created an imbalanced demographic profile of the population, with the younger generations heavily underrepresented. Among the most discussed issues related to the ageing population are those with the lack of care for the elderly or the possible collapse of the pension system (Dimitrová, 2007; Janičko, Tsharkyan, 2013; Minařík, Pešl, 2006). For these reasons, increasing the fertility has become a significant political topic across the political scale with many different solutions being proposed. Events which celebrate, encourage and/or facilitate the birth of a child and transition to parenthood thus have a lot of political support.

From the perspective of the municipalities, a new resident represents an income which they naturally need to take care of the local affairs. It may be presumed that a stable or increasing population of a municipality makes it more stable and prosperous overall as it generates more interest of investors, media and potential new inhabitants. The local administrations thus want to see the municipality growing in population due to the rise in income as well as importance. Many places across the country are also negatively affected by internal migration and processes of (sub)urbanization, which typically see people from the regions

migrating to bigger cities and their suburbs due to more work opportunities and better infrastructure (Mulíček, Sýkora, 2012). What helped counter this process at least to some extent was the decentralization of power and the revitalization of local administrations (Ouředníček, Novák, Šimon, 2013). Those are thriving nowadays and have even generated a successful party (called “Starostové a nezávislí”, “Mayors and Independents”). This can be taken as a sign of trust which citizens put into local politicians.

### 3. (Re)inventing Traditions

The nature and form of Vítání občánků as a rite of passage in and of itself does not, however, explain how and why it came about to exist. For this purpose, I will be using the theory of invented tradition. Byron King Plant identifies two main approaches to invented traditions – that of Eric Hobsbawm and a constructivist one (2008). I will explain why I have chosen to use the Hobsbawmian theory despite its flaws identified (among others) by the constructivists. In the second section, I will present a theory of a re-invented tradition, which helps explain how Vítání občánků managed to survive the change of political regime in 1989.

#### 3.1 Invented Tradition

The notion of “invented tradition“ can first be found in the work *The Invention of Tradition* published in 1983 by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Plant, 2008: 176-177). Invented traditions, according to Hobsbawm, “seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.” (Hobsbawm, 2012: 1) For a new, invented tradition to be accepted by the public, it must blend in well with (the transformations of) existing, old traditions (Beiner, 2001: 6). The changes in structure and interpretation of the tradition are easily accepted, and often even undetected, as people are given direction and something familiar and understandable that they can hold onto (Post, 1996: 91).

Invented traditions frequently appear during a rapid transformation of society as old traditions no longer hold up and new ones are needed (Hobsbawm, 2012: 4-5). A particular attention of Hobsbawm’s was given to the Industrial Revolution and the dawn of modernity which brought about the demise of many (old and “authentic”) traditions and, correspondingly, the increased need for new ones to supersede them (Beiner, 2001: 4). As such, their role in the societal shift was typically to establish social cohesion in groups or communities, legitimize institutions and relations of authority, and/or to socialize (Hobsbawm, 2012: 9)

However, critical voices have noted that when studying a tradition, it is virtually impossible to fulfil the main criterion needed for assessing its authenticity, that is to satisfactorily trace its historical pedigree (Beiner, 2001: 3; Plant, 2008: 179). In addition to that, the

differentiation between „old“ and „invented“ traditions results in the connotation of falsity, artificiality, contrivance and even manipulation (Plant, 2008: 177; Post, 1996: 85-86). Representatives of the constructivist approach, Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin, postulate that not only should we not judge whether a tradition is authentic or not, traditions should not be considered as having an objective quality of being a tradition at all. Instead, they should be understood as a symbolic process during which they keep being re-invented and re-interpreted by the participants who decide to perform it. (Handler, Linnekin, 1984) In the same vein, post-modern and post-colonial thinkers have since began using the term of “invention” in the sense of re-imagining, interpretation and translation (Beiner, 2001: 3). However, others believe that Hobsbawm was not occupied with the “unmasking of invented pasts” or exposing manipulations and falsities. Instead, he was simply interested in the process of cultural construction of history, which is why apart from “invention” he often uses more neutral terms, such as “creation” or “construction”. (Post, 1996: 91-92).

Nonetheless, the attributes of authenticity and falsity are frequently discussed when considering Hobsbawm’s approach, and for some, this aspect is, in fact, an asset. Plant, for instance, warns against the undervaluation of the historical and social context. The inability to assess the authenticity and history of a tradition may prove to be unfortunate which he demonstrates in the case of a legal process concerning the claim to rights based on tradition. (Plant, 2008: 183-184) This assertion is also quite pertinent when considering the case of Vítání občánků. In order to gain an understanding of it in its entirety, both in the past and in the present, it is essential to reflect on the historical context during which it was established and practiced. In addition to that, one cannot fully grasp the existence of the ceremony without taking into account the rapid social change during which the Communist Party was attempting to bolster their influence and position in society. To use the constructivist approach to explain the event would mean to ignore one of the most important factors of its existence and way of practice. For this reason, I am using Hobsbawm’s theory of invented tradition to explain the creation of the ceremony. Due to its fairly recent history and indisputable circumstances of origin, it is not impossible to discern its authenticity in the hobsbawmian sense which makes the use of the theory all the more pertinent.

Another issue that Plant takes with Hobsbawm’s approach is the question of intent of those who invent the tradition. There is no objective criterion which could let us assess whether the intent was legitimate thus allowing for interpretive discrepancies. (ibid.: 179)

Nevertheless, this problem of intent does not apply in the case of *Vítání občánků* due to the unconcealed political motives and principles of the Communist Party. Nevertheless, to avoid mis-characterizing the event, I will be using Wendy Griswold's methodological framework whose main advantage is its high sensitivity to intent of the actors as well as historical circumstances (1987).

What may be detected in his theory of invented tradition is, however, also Hobsbawm's Marxist belief in class manipulation (Beiner, 2001: 6). This is in line with the idea introduced by Gramsci which accentuates the significant role of cultural hegemony in the maintaining of the economico-political dominance of one class over another, specifically in the way it facilitates its manipulation (Testa, 2021: 10). Traditions are considered the ruling elite's weapon of social control as it uses a mythologized version of the past to legitimize the status quo (Samuel, 1996: 16-17). For Beiner, Hobsbawm's approach combines the Marxist class conflict belief with elitist and colonialist elements as it maintains that the susceptible masses do not have traditions of their own that would be significant enough, but rather that they let the elites manipulate them and dictate their traditions for them (2001: 6).

### **3.2 Re-Invented Tradition**

Having weighted on the strengths and flaws of both Hobsbawm's and the constructivist approach, Plant calls for the scholars to reassess how they conceptualize traditions and to adopt new approaches that would be more precise and culturally sensitive (2008). Similarly, Beiner requests that the rediscovery, reinterpretation and reconstruction of tradition and its ultimate (un)successful acceptance by the people be further explored (2001: 6). The sentiment of the need for a reconsideration and a reframing of the concept of tradition is echoed in other more recent publications by other scholars (Isnart, Testa et al., 2020). And, while Hobsbawm's theory of invented tradition seems pertinent when explaining the origin of *Vítání občánků* and existence under the Communist regime, a slightly different approach must be adopted when considering its post-Communist trajectory. Although the changes it underwent were brought about by a rapid social and political change, its continuity with the (Communist) past was not broken nor was it invented anew. Its status as a weapon of the elites to manipulate the masses also became weakened as power was decentralized and attendance became optional.

The reason for the deficiencies of the theory when applied to the ensuing development may lie in the fact that Hobsbawm's focus was not on the subsequent destiny of the invented tradition, rather he focused solely on the process of its creation (Post, 1996: 92). Furthermore, he concerned himself primarily with the modern history, even going as far as assessing the "golden age" of tradition-inventing between 1870-1914 (Beiner, 2001: 5). Since then, the world has experienced (an)other equally impactful shift(s) to post-modernism due to (among other things) increased globalization, massification and advances in computer science. For these reasons, scholars have begun to talk about re-invented traditions.

A once invented tradition may be re-invented when another social change takes place (e.g. Assmann, 2008; DeWaal, 2013; Hohmann, 2010). DeWaal argues that while the symbols may remain the same, understandings of their meaning may change radically so much so that they may end up with a completely reversed meaning to what they originally had (2013). This is possible due to various mechanisms, such as intergenerational processes of forgetting, employment of empty signifiers, constructing narratives of continuity and seeing traditions as timeless as well as projecting temporally specific, modern meanings onto their origins (ibid.) However, for a (re)invention of a tradition to be successful, it must be in accordance with the current social and political atmosphere (Erözden, 2013). Moreover, Erözden argues that central to its success is international resonance. In other words, it must reflect the contemporary values and way of thinking of the general public which tends to be shaped by the broader international context. (ibid.) At the same time, however, the reception of a re-invented tradition by the public is, in fact, an active act (Beiner, 2001: 6).

Re-invention may be a part of another process – that of a revival of a tradition. Revival is the result of two processes, the renaissance of interest in and the reinvention of an ancient tradition (Salvador-Amores, 2011: 295). The basis is formed by traditions which used to exist at some point in history, but then declined or perished. When they are revived after a period of time, the general sentiment is that of continuity and of re-discovery of the old identity, meanings and experiences. However, in reality, it is primarily shaped by the new circumstances under which it was revived, with completely new, contemporary meanings and practices attached. As a consequence, they are "formally connected to the past but rooted in the existential and material needs of the present" (Testa, 2020: 24).



Studying the re-invention of a ritual – that is which elements are abandoned, which ones are preserved, (re)appropriated and/or re-designed, which new ones are introduced and how it is performed – may provide an insight into the power distribution and social hierarchies in the society and how it has navigated its transition to a new regime (Egreteau, 2020). Just like an invention of a tradition, a successful reinvention of it, may be a powerful political tool, as the idealised account of the past may be used as a leverage when promoting and establishing a desired set of contemporary values and principles (McCulloch, McCaigh, 2002: 251).

Invented during the social change from democracy to communism, the fate of Vítání občánků hung in the balance with another social transformation, this time from communism to democracy, underway. In some places, the ceremony was abandoned (and sometimes later embraced anew), in others it adapted to the new circumstances and continued on. Overall, the change of political regime inevitably affected the execution of Vítání občánků. For one, it became entirely optional for people to attend it as well as for municipalities to organize it. Furthermore, its symbolisms and ceremonial acts had to be re-thought to lose the negative connotations of the past but keep or invent those which would reflect the contemporary people's needs and requirements. The recipe for its successful survival past the Velvet Revolution lay in masterfully combining (pseudo)traditional, Communist and modern elements. In other words, it re-invented itself and became 'hybridized'. This term was used by Sophie Hohmann in her article on the re-invention of traditional medicine in contemporary Uzbekistan. She describes how the Soviet Union used to suppress traditional medicine in favour of the more scientific approach. Due to this political association, people became distrustful of modern medicine and when Uzbekistan gained independence, they started rejecting it. An answer to this problem was a new 'hybridized' form of medical practitioners-tabibs who are trained in both modern and (what people believe to be) traditional medicine. (Hohmann, 2010) I believe that Vítání občánků has followed a similar trajectory re-inventing itself in many places as a credible and attractive tradition even for contemporary parents.

### **3.3 Institutional Change**

“How can actors change institutions if their actions, intentions, and, rationality are all conditioned by the very institution they wish to change?“. When Petter Holm opened his article (1995: 398) by this question, he formulated the basic paradox which up to now lies at the heart of the new institutional theory. Successor to the “old institutionalism” of Philip

Selznick and others, neoinstitutionalism poses a counterpoint to the determinism of functionalism and individualism in that it presumes that individual preferences, actions and thoughts are shaped by institutional forces (Powell, DiMaggio 2012: 3; 12). It is founded on the theory of action which suggests that most human behaviour is constituted by institutions and thus unreflective and routinised (ibid.: 14)

It bears to mention that there is great diversity of approaches within this theory. Powell and DiMaggio even claimed that “there are as many “new institutionalisms” as there are social science disciplines” (2012: 1). Some of the fundamental differences concern the conceptualization of institutions, choice of the focal feature(s), overall logic and approach (from micro to macro) and various other elements (ibid.; Powell, Bromley, 2015). The shared concern however lies in explaining institutional change through the dilemma of structure versus agency, or specifically the embeddedness of agency (Holm, 1995; Seo, Creed, 2002; Leca, Battilana, Boxenbaum, 2008).

In recent decades, attempts to reconcile and/or go beyond the two common but simplistic explanations to the dilemma– that of an external impulse and that of extraordinarily gifted actors – have been made (DellaPosta et al., 2017; DiMaggio, 2017; Dorado; 2005). Through an analysis of contemporary research on this topic, Leca, Battilana and Boxenbaum have identified two emerging categories of enabling conditions under which an actor is likely to become a so-called institutional entrepreneur. Firstly, it is field-level conditions, such as precipitating jolts or crises, the presence of acute problems and degrees of heterogeneity and institutionalization. Secondly, it is the actors’ social position and the actors’ specific characteristics. (Leca, Battilana and Boxenbaum, 2008)

When studying the process of (re)invention, it would be simplistic to rely on the explanation of a “change of regime” as the singular reason for it. Although it provides a suitable environment, it does not fully explain its endurance nor changes it has undergone. Many institutionalized traditions did not succeed in re-inventing themselves during the transition from communism to democracy – dožínky (a harvest festival), International Worker’s Day, Spartakiads and many more. And so, while the realization of Vítání občánků is likely to reflect the socio-cultural context of the socialist period at first and the post-1989 democratic era afterwards, in order to explain the process of its change one must go further. The original creation and introduction of Vítání občánků was a clear-cut case of a top-down process

initiated and controlled by the totalitarian Communist state. By contrast, its endurance past the Velvet Revolution and adaptation to the contemporary times is a much more interesting and complex process in which we may expect institutional entrepreneurs to play a significant role.

## 4. Research Design

### 4.1 Aims and Research Questions

The design of this thesis was influenced by the lack of previous research into Vítání občánků by social scientists, including sociologists, anthropologists, ethnographers and folklorists. Nor was I able to find any source outside of academia that would provide a more extensive and comprehensive insight into the event. For this reason, I have chosen to proceed in accordance with Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser's grounded theory which allowed me to collect and analyse data in a flexible manner. In addition, I have employed Wendy Griswold's methodological framework crafted for the needs of sociological research in the realm of culture as a means of sensitive but systematic analysis of the data. The bulk of the theoretical guidance has come from socio-anthropological theories on rites of passage, traditions, re-enchantment, and kin topics.

The aim of my thesis is to explore how "Vítání občánků" is performed and perceived nowadays and subsequently explain why. In order to understand the current practice, one must take into account its original establishment and the transformations it has undergone. Despite these changes, its function as a rite of passage not only for the child but also for its parents and broader family is an inherent and unchanging part of the ceremony. Therefore, the research is overall guided by the following research questions:

- What is "Vítání občánků", when and why was it established?
- What transformations has "Vítání občánků" undergone during the transition to democracy?
  - o How is "Vítání občánků" performed nowadays and are there any local differences?
  - o How and why do municipalities organize the event nowadays?
  - o In which aspects does it retain its Communist legacy?
  - o Which trends have shaped the way "Vítání občánků" is performed and perceived nowadays?
- What role does "Vítání občánků" play in the parents' transition to parenthood?
  - o Why do parents attend the ceremony?
  - o How do the parents experience the ceremony?

## 4.2 Data and Methodology

As specified above, the research design is a combination of the grounded theory framework by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss and the methodological framework for the sociology of culture by Wendy Griswold. In the beginning, in particular, I was guided by the principles of the grounded theory, such as non-probability sampling. This means that the participants, interviewees and other data sources are not chosen at random, nor are they pre-selected from the start. Rather the researcher chooses what the next step will be upon constant, simultaneous deliberation, reflection and comparison of the previously gained and analysed data until all concepts and categories are saturated. (Baker et al., 1992; Bryant, 2019: 24; Cutcliffe, 2000: 1477)

The first municipalities selected for this research were in the Central Bohemia region with which I am familiar the most. At first, the choice was influenced by their diverse size, geographical placement, availability of information about the ceremony there, and the probability of providing new insights. Subsequently, I started also looking at places which were in different regions, contacting those who seemed to have a dissimilar approach to the ceremony. Due to my inability to reach the more distant locations flexibly, for in-person interviews I generally preferred municipalities or districts in Prague or Central Bohemia. This approach solidified when I did not identify any significant regional differences.

<b>municipality/municipal district</b>	<b>region</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>Population</b>
Dobříš	Central Bohemia	Příbram	8 772
Holovousy	Hradec Králové	Jičín	518
Hostivice	Central Bohemia	Prague-West	9787
Hovorčovice	Central Bohemia	Prague-East	2687
Kralupy nad Vltavou	Central Bohemia	Mělník	18 375
Prague 4	Prague		130 957
Prague 8	Prague		104 921
Rakovník	Central Bohemia	Rakovník	55 185
Veselí nad Moravou	South Moravia	Hodonín	10 355

*Table 1: Alphabetical overview of the "main" municipalities explored, source of population: ČSÚ, 2021*

Overall, I covered in depth 9 different municipalities<sup>4</sup> in which *Vítání občánků* takes place (see Tab. 2). In addition to these “main” cases, I also explored a number of other places, albeit without visiting them in person or communicating with any respondents. In all the

<sup>4</sup> Quarters of Prague are not municipalities but municipal districts. They will be however included in the term “municipality” as the terminological difference is not significant for the purpose of this thesis.

“main” cases I first went through any available information, such as local journals, websites, local TV stations’ archives, YouTube videos, social media of the municipality or other organisers and participants (e.g. photographers, singers, etc.), chronicles and official records from municipality meetings. The research process in line with the grounded theory is initiated by observing and interviewing significant individuals (Baker et al., 1992: 1358). Based on these sources, I prepared the structure of an interview and decided who the “significant individual” may be, contacting them over e-mail. The person contacted then either became my key informant or recommended to me another more suitable person for the role. In a few additional cities, which do not figure among the main nine, the contacted person declined to participate or did not answer my email at all. The initial preparation that I did for these places also informed my research and will figure in the analysis to a certain extent, but no interview was conducted, nor did I visit the ceremony there.

The key informants were typically mayors, deputy mayors, registrars or heads of offices responsible for the organisation, and in one case a parish priest. Later on, I found out that a good source of information are photographers, so they also fulfilled the role. To ensure de-identification, I will not link key informants to municipalities. Interviews with key informants were carried out in a number of different ways. In two cases the informant preferred to realize them over emails. In the rest of the cases, they were conducted in person, sometimes at a different day to the ceremony, in other cases shortly before or after the ceremony. In all cases they signed informed consent (see attachment). In most cases, there was only one key informant present, but in several others two or even three of them participated jointly. In a few cases I interviewed several key participants from the same place individually at different times. The interviews were recorded with the interviewee’s consent, except for one case where the participant asked for it not to be recorded, so I took notes instead. The interviews loosely followed the pre-prepared structure.

In four cases I visited the *Vítání občánků* ceremony – or rather ceremonies, as typically they were broken up into several sessions so that the groups of children would not be too large – and in two cases a separate event of planting the “trees of life”. There, with the permission of an organiser, I observed the ceremonies and talked to the organisers, families and friends present and took notes of what I was observing and thinking. When approaching the respondents, I made sure to always inform them about my purpose there and ask for their permission to include their opinions in my thesis. In cases of longer conversations, I used a

recording device explicitly asking for their permission to record them. I also attempted to approach suitable respondents in these municipalities outside of Vítání občánků, especially in the places where I did not visit the ceremony. They were typically parents or grandparents with small children, and I employed the same precautions described. Thanks to these conversations I also gained insight from (grand)parents who decided not to attend the ceremony, who were yet to decide whether to come and who have experienced it some time ago so could reflect on it in more depth.

A necessary step was to unify all data into text form. I transcribed the interviews, ideally literally if possible although sometimes noise in the background made it difficult. During and after each ceremony I attended and (during and) after certain interviews I took notes. From original text documents, such as chronicles, local journals, town websites etc. I selected only relevant parts and for photographs and videos I made descriptions or transcriptions. I then open-coded selected parts of the data to identify the constitutive elements of the ceremony.

### 4.3 Analysis

The analysis itself is grounded in Griswold’s framework which, in turn, is based on the theories of Lucien Goldmann and Clifford Geertz (Griswold, 1987; see Table 2). Finding a consensus to these two theorists, Wendy Griswold proposes an approach which enables generalization “beyond the strictly local while remaining agnostic about ultimate causality in any particular case” (ibid.: 23). Having taken into consideration two main phases of agency, that of a producer and a recipient, and four interrelated actions of intention, reception, comprehension and explanation, she proposed a methodological framework fit to

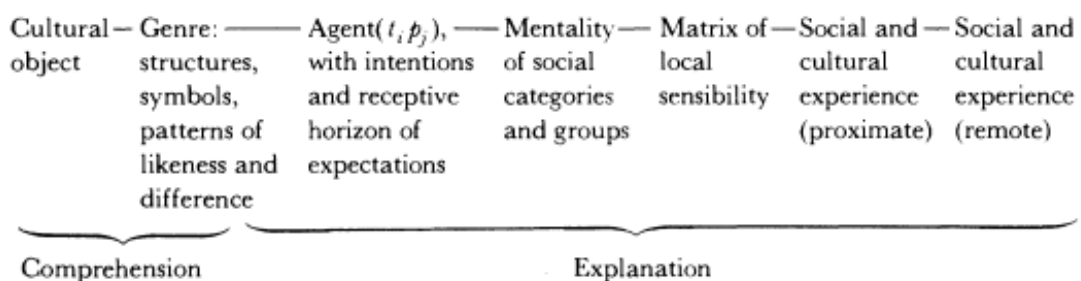


Table 2: Methodological framework by Wendy Griswold (Griswold, 1987: 26)

analyse what she calls a *cultural object*. A *cultural object* refers to “shared significance

embodied in form, i.e., to an expression of social meanings that is tangible or can be put into words.” (ibid.: 4). In this thesis, Vítání občánků as a whole is taken to be the cultural object.

In the comprehension phase, the analyst attempts to apperceive the cultural object with the aid of genres. Genres are a convenient fiction which allows the analyst to situate the object into a classification created on the basis of its similarities and differences of (patterns of) symbols, relations and structures compared to other cultural objects. The aim is to interpret it in terms of what is already known with respect to both the producer and the recipient. (ibid.: 17-20; 24) In order to determine a genre, one must consult experts, which are firstly, academic specialists and secondly, key local informants (ibid.: 24). While VO itself is rarely ever discussed in academic literature, similar ceremonies are typically classified as rites of passage (e.g. Navrátilová, Verner, 2004: 140). In a rather uncommon overlap of etic and emic aspects, local informants were in agreement with this classification. Several of them even explicitly chose to characterize the event as such. For these reasons, I have decided to analyse Vítání občánků as a rite of passage.

Explanation lets us link the cultural object to the external social world (Griswold, 1987: 5). Its phases, which begin with the specification of agency, are linked and separated from each other by social institutions. Agents may involve a number of social actors, including a cultural producer, recipient or a mediator but there are only two main phases of agency considered: intention and reception. Intention refers to the purpose and constraints of the social agent(s) when producing the cultural object as it is presumed that their choices stemmed from their concrete situation and membership in social categories and groups. (ibid.: 24-25) Inspired by Michael Baxandall’s work, Griswold suggests reconstructing charges and briefs which influenced the creator. A charge is an external or internal prompt which encouraged the creator to act a certain way, whereas a brief refers to both narrow and broad constraints and influences of each charge. (ibid.: 5-9)

Reception, on the other hand, concerns the receiver(s), that is the social agent(s) impacted or influenced by the cultural object. However, it is not a simply passive process either. How and how much the receivers consume, incorporate or reject the cultural object as well as what meaning they give it varies significantly. (ibid.: 5; 10) A reason for this is the fact that contexts, meanings and overall reception change over time (Griswold, 1986; Griswold, 1987: 12). Griswold suggests breaking up the research of reception into two phases: the first



one should concern the original context while in the second phase the focus should be on the changes over time. The research conducted in this way should provide the answer to (1) why a certain cultural object succeeded and became established in its time; and (2) how the genres and meanings of the object have changed, as well as when, how and to whom the object has been meaningful. (1986: 4). It is necessary to bear in mind that cultural interactions are not a simple, unidirectional process. (1987: 14) It can be safely assumed that the context and meanings of *Vítání občánků* of 50 years ago has retrospectively shifted compared to how they may have been perceived at the time. This is pertinent for the study of *Vítání občánků* as an invented tradition, that is before 1989. In the subsequent case of re-invented tradition, I am treating the whole period after the year 1989 to present as the context of origin and thus considering only the first phase. A useful tool when considering reception may be systematic comparison of how different (groups of) recipients interact with the cultural object and what meanings they create. Moreover, Griswold indicates several types of reception, namely interpretation, market success, impact on fields of cultural reference, canonization, and endurance. They are interrelated and not necessarily inconclusive but may guide the researcher through the analysis of the “receptive horizon”. (ibid: 10-13)

Using the codes I created, I selected a set of elements which fulfil the genre of rites of passage, separately for the period before 1989 and after 1989. Then I attempted to re-create the horizon of intention, that is the briefs and charges. The main (re)inventing actor was the Communist Party as a whole when contemplating the original VO and the municipalities in the case of the post-revolution VO. The main categories of recipients I considered were firstly, newborns, secondly, parents and thirdly, broader community (see Chap. 2).

Specifying the social categories, such as sex, age, education etc., and the more formally organized social groups allows us to explore the local sensibility which can further be, albeit arbitrarily, divided into proximate and remote. It is based on Geertz’s thinking and refers to “the ways of thinking and behaving characteristic of the (...) spatial and temporal context of groups and agents” (ibid.: 25). Griswold also recommends that an inference made using this framework be valid, first of all, if two or more of its elements are connected in a way that, based on the available evidence, is correct, and second of all, if standards of social science, such as parsimony, plenitude and amplitude, are met (ibid.: 27).

## 5. On the Invention of Vítání občanů

Sources on whether and how the ceremony was performed, particularly in the first decades of Communism, are often scarce and unreliable. It is likely that the turbulent events of the 1940s and (chiefly early) 1950s impacted the ability to document local events. For instance, Jiří Kučera, an amateur-researcher of the history of Hostivice, warns that the oldest records in the 1950s chronicle were not appended until much later (Kučera, 2009: 5). Chronicles from the municipalities I studied often lacked any mention of Vítání občanů or only included a few brief notes over the decades, despite it decisively having taken place there on a regular basis. For instance, elderly citizens of Veselí nad Moravou were certain that they attended the ceremony in the early 1970s or even 1960s. There is, however, no mention of Vítání občanů in the chronicles, as far as I noticed, between 1969 to 1975 (Němeček, 1969-1975).

In Hostivice, SPOZ (Committee for Civil Issues) was established in 1953 and its objectives included taking care of the ceremonial aspects of civil weddings, funerals, making the overaged citizens' lives more pleasant (sic) and last but not least welcoming newborns. (Kučera et al., 2020 [1950-1970]: 67) It is not however described more closely how the newborns were being welcomed and whether anything of the sort actually took place. The first recorded ceremony of Vítání občanů took place on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1957. (ibid.: 81) In 1963, the chronicler already speaks of “traditional welcoming of newborns” (ibid.: 126). Yet the mentions of the event remain scarce until the 1970s (ibid.; Kučera, Šrámek, 2020a [1971-1975]). A possible explanation may lie in the historical events, namely the so-called normalization process. When in 1969 the Communist Party re-gained control of the country after its near loss during the second half of the 1960s (the so-called Prague Spring), it did so in a thorough and extensive fashion. One of the consequences may have been a general renewal of Vítání občanů and its stricter enforcement. This is in accordance with the fact that the majority of elderly people I talked to could recall the event taking place only as far as the 1970s. An elderly lady has told me that she believes that it only started taking place there in the year 1970 when she was first asked to play the organ there. This would correspond with the beginning of the normalization era. If this assumption is true, then it would mean that while the origins of Vítání občanů are, in fact, in the 1950s, it did not become a universal and almost compulsory event until twenty years later. This development was also noted by a journalist from Hlinsko: “At first, the Communists' enforcement of the

ceremony was not successful. Vítání občánků at the national committees only became a social routine during normalization after the year 1970.” (Netolická, 2021)

## 5.1 Introducing a New Ceremony

A report in the chronicle in Veselí nad Moravou (Fojtík, Němeček, 1956-1969: 32) allows a glimpse of the introduction of the ceremony into the town which took place on February 8, 1958. A sole child was welcomed there but already in a practically identical manner to how it was practiced elsewhere at any other point during the Communist era. In fact, it is likely that the origin of these ideas and their approval stemmed from the most consequential source, the leadership of the Soviet Union, and were thus (to various extent and with dissimilar success) advanced all over the empire and its satellites (cf. McDowell, 1974).

The first-ever VO in Veselí nad Moravou took place in a ceremonially decorated room at the local committee which was filled with the local political representatives. The programme consisted of the chairman’s speech, gifts for the child, photography-taking, signing a commemorative book, performances of music and poems and congratulating the parents. The chronicler talks about how successful, popular and universally liked this first ceremony was but it is likely propaganda rather than an attempt at objective reporting. *“We believe that this form of attention to the little citizens will soon take root among our citizens and that this first example will be received by other parents in our town,”* he appeals at the end of the report (Fojtík, Němeček, 1956-1969: 32) A very similar way of introduction of a replacement ceremony for baptism (albeit a name-giving one) can be observed in Lithuania, as documents the article by Petkūnas (2013). It was organized by a similar Committee and included practically identical elements to the VO, even though the official report from the period stressed the ceremony’s spontaneity and folksiness. Both articles document the (probably as of yet unfulfilled) aspiration of the Party as regards these events.

Ceremonies designed to replace baptism were not the only newly established event at the time. In fact, they were but one in a string of new Communist festivities whose purpose was to promote Communist values, substitute previous institutions, and gain control over the life of every citizen. The aforementioned Committee for Civil Issues (SPOZ) was in charge of organizing most of them, typically in co-operation with local schools, pioneers, and other committees. Many of the events were aimed at “welcoming” – welcoming first-year pupils, pre-schoolers, Spring and so on. Furthermore, there were ceremonies during which high

schoolers received their diplomas or identity cards, soldiers were sent presents, the elderly congratulated on life jubilees and many cultural events organized, particularly for the elderly. Just like in the case of *Vítání občánků*, the reasons were not kept secret. “*On March 30 and 31 an extensive event “The Joyful Welcoming of the Spring” took place. It is meant to become an opposing force to religious spring rituals.*” proclaimed for instance a school chronicle in 1956 (Kučera, Mansfeld, Šrámek et al., 2020 [1947-1957]: 73). Another feature these events had in common was the forced pomp and joy, apparent already from the name of the spring-welcoming event. This attitude and jargon were also (omni)present in *Vítání občánků* which was most commonly described as “ceremonial” or “joyful”, words rarely used to describe it nowadays as it sounds constrained.

At the same time, *Vítání občánků* was sometimes used as a platform to conduct other acts of Communist propaganda, such as offering special congratulations to people born on (or very close to) days considered special by the Communist Party. “*Individually welcomed are little citizens born on January 1 and also all the children born on days which are significant for our homeland,*” informed the local journal in Kralupy nad Vltavou in 1988 (Hanousková, 1988: 9) Among those were the popular Communist holidays of May 1, the International Worker’s Day, and May 9, Victory Day (Kučera, Šrámek, 2020b [1976-1985]: 160). The special acknowledgement was sometimes also extended to triplets (Hanousková, 1988: 9) or people celebrating milestone birthdays whose birth date was exceptionally meaningful. “*Especially festive was the Vítání held on May 8 during which Miroslava Slámová-Novotná, born on May 9, 1945, i. e. on the day of our liberation, was congratulated on her 35<sup>th</sup> birthday,*” mentions the chronicler in Hostivice (Kučera, Šrámek, 2020b [1976-1985]: 86).

*Vítání občánků* thus formed a part of a greater scheme of Communist events organized typically by the SPOZ. A part of this scheme was the interconnected structure of various actors who played different roles in it. This ensured that almost everybody was pressured into participating at one point or another. Willingness and enthusiasm to participate was constantly monitored and if unsatisfactory could affect one’s opportunities. Although *Vítání občánků* was not officially designated as compulsory, the general understanding was that this principle applies. This is shown in an interaction between two respondents who organize the event nowadays when they were recalling what it used to be like during socialism:

*A: "I'm not even sure if it was compulsory back then, I mean in the seventies or so. But the majority definitely took part."*

*B: "I think that if you didn't go, you would have a black mark."<sup>5</sup>*

At some point during the seventies, a new practice was introduced in some places. Local companies would take up 'patronage' of the event, some permanently, others temporarily. In Hostivice, this was first introduced in 1976. From then on, a different set of patrons was arranged for each ceremony. Delegates from the companies would attend it and give the families presents. (Kučera, Šrámek, 2020b [1976-1985]) Their choice was likely influenced by where the new parents in attendance worked. Their employers were favoured to take up the patronage and congratulate them in person. The incentive for this likely came from the top and was then carried out compliantly by both the municipality and the companies. The arrangement of all this probably came down to the structure and modus operandi of the Communist Party. Attempts to encourage employers to visit and/or give a gift to their employees who have become parents could be found even before as the Party hoped to form and solidify these relations (Navrátilová, 1984: 31, 34). The motivation from the part of the representatives of the patrons was to fulfil or even surpass the expectations put on them by the Party which then allowed for their potential promotion. The job market as well as all enterprises were state-controlled so one's career was often judged more by loyalty to the Party and its doctrines than by one's abilities, education or achievements.

For the Communist Party this system allowed them to control the behaviour of various actors even at the local level. The structure of different actors taking part also meant an opportunity to reinforce Communist values in accordance with the actors' age and status. *Vítání občánek* was thus deliberately used, for example, as an educational opportunity for children who performed there (Kučera, Saifrt, 2020 [1967-1976]: 78). The Communists' enthusiasm for modern science also manifested in the organization of their events. In Hostivice, the age of children expected to attend was determined after a consultation with a local doctor. Medics from the Czechoslovak Red Cross organization (Československý červený kříž) were present to assist the mothers. Ceremonial photographs were taken of each family. (Kučera, Šrámek, 2020a [1971-1975]: 101; Navrátilová, 1984: 34) The almost "sacral worshipping of

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<sup>5</sup> „Já ani nevím, jestli to dřív bylo povinně, myslím tím třeba v nějakých sedmdesátých letech. Ale určitě většina se zúčastňovala.“ „BH: Já si myslím, že když jsi tam nešla, tak že jsi černej puntík měla.“

knowledge and truth” were an integral part of the Communist ideology and it played an important role in the legitimization of its politics (Sabrow et al., 2012: 205). As a result, a remarkable variety of actors took part in the event.

## 5.2 Baptism-Inspired

Vítání občánků was created to replace baptism as part of the attempt to diminish the influence of and people’s dependency on religion, or specifically in the case of Czechoslovakia predominantly the Catholic Church. Where in baptism a child is being welcomed into the community of Christians, in VO the newly-gained identity was that of a citizen of the country. A commemorative tag which the child would receive could read for instance ‘Citizen of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic’ (ČT, 2010: 12:50). This was done so that the ceremony would become meaningful as a rite of passage and, therefore, could compete with baptism.

When introducing and promoting Vítání občánků, the aim to replace baptism was not a secret. Rather, it was done with pride: *“Following the example of other towns, our Local Committee too established a committee for welcoming young citizens into life so that the registration of new citizens would be performed with greater joy and pomp than it used to in church.”* (Fojtík, Němeček 1956-1969: 32). This was written about the first ever Vítání občánků in the town of Veselí nad Moravou which was attended by a sole child. At the time baptism was likely still a commonplace practice, especially since the town resides in the overwhelmingly religious South Moravia. Yet the chronicler (an avid supporter of the Communist regime) used the past tense to describe baptism to support the idea that it is a bygone relic of the past. Interestingly, he never mentioned the word “baptism”, indirectly characterizing it, instead, as an equivalent to the registration of new citizens which used to take place in church. Any indication of its true meaning and value for the Church was omitted as if irrelevant. The competition chosen to replace the original religious symbolism seem to be “joy and pomp”, authority of the Local Committee and association with other towns, possibly invoking nationwide Communist unity, and also inevitable progress.

Another aspect this citation uncovers is the awareness of the Communist Party, including lower-ranking members, of the fact that in order to attract people to Vítání občánků, they must appeal to the sense of continuity with baptism. This was not done only verbally, they also tried to evoke this feeling through many elements of the ceremony which are copied

from it. One such element directly adopted from baptism is vow-taking. Here is an excerpt of the description of how it took place in the mid-1970s in the village of Hostivice as recorded by the chronicler:

*“[A deputy of the Local Committee] delivered a short speech to the parents in which he offered [his] congratulations on the birth of their child and reminded them of their duty to raise it into a good person and a proper citizen of our socialist state. (...) a representative of the Women’s Committee, on behalf of the parents, expressed their promise to raise the children in the way requested in the deputy’s speech. To confirm this all the parents along with family members put their signatures in the commemorative book underneath their child’s name. After them, all present representatives of the National Front signed there as witnesses.”*<sup>6</sup> (Kučera, Šrámek, 2020a [1971-1975]: 101)

In this we can see a strong resemblance to baptism in several respects. The vow itself is being taken on behalf of the child by its parents but also other relatives, representatives of the Church in case of baptism or Communist Party in case of VO and other people in attendance. Its content revolves around raising the child into a “good person” with the values of socialism (in baptism Christianity). Where nowadays parents and godparents would sign a parish register, the commemorative book (*‘pamětní kniha’*) serves this purpose in Vítání občánků. However, the information in it is typically restricted to the child’s and parents’ names, possibly the child’s date of birth and the date of Vítání občánků.

The functional roles carried out in the ceremony also resemble baptism. The main focus is naturally on the child and its parents as well as families and neighbours. A special role is fulfilled by the main speaker, typically the Local Committee chairman, who guides the parents through the rite of passage instead of the priest. A rare difference across towns seems to be the presence of godparents who are important figures in baptism. In some places (e.g. Hostivice), a similar role (of witnesses) is undertaken by local or national political representatives. In other places, it seems that the parents choose the witnesses who could be thus presumed to be the child’s godparents if it is being baptised. I noted this for instance in

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<sup>6</sup> „Poslanec, obvykle místopředseda MNV, (...) přednesl krátký projev k rodičům, v němž jim blahopřál k narození dítěte a připomněl jim povinnost vychovávat je v dobrého člověka a řádného občana našeho socialistického státu. (...) zástupkyně Výboru žen, která potom z pověření rodičů vyjádřila jejich slib vychovávat děti tak, jak to bylo v místopředsedově projevu požadováno. Na potvrzení toho podepsali se pak všichni rodiče spolu s rodinnými příslušníky do pamětní knihy pod jméno svého dítěte. Po nich se sem podepsali jako svědci i všichni přítomní zástupci složek Národní fronty.“

Veselí nad Moravou (Fojtík, Němeček, 1956-1969: 32), a very religious region where the importance of this institution was probably much higher than in the more secularized parts of the country.

At the end of the ceremony, the child receives a commemorative certificate. This seems to have meant to imitate the baptism certificate. Unlike that one, however, neither the commemorative certificate nor the signature in the commemorative book had any official significance or impact on one's life. Their presence was simply an imitation of what people were familiar with. This can be observed not only in the objects and content of certain actions, but also the functional roles and the sequence of acts.

### **5.3 Historical Folk Traditions and Universal Values**

Folklore was deliberately used during many periods of the Czech(oslovak) history as a means to building national identity, particularly by the renaissance movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or during the First Republic between the World Wars (e.g. Frolec, 1987). This could be observed with the Czech Communist governance, as well. Yet, the stance of Soviet Communists on folklore had not been always positive as they disapproved of its glorification of tsars, fantasies, bourgeois ideals, the 'kulak attitude' and so on (Oinas, 1975: 157). But eventually, they found it to be a useful ideological tool. Several important arguments in favour of folklore were raised by Maxim Gor'kij, namely its connection "with the concrete life and working conditions of the people", its optimism and its high artistic value (Oinas, 1973: 46-47 in Oinas, 1975:158). Soon after, centres of folklore were founded and selected folklorists and students were instructed to collect and promote "ideologically pure folklore" (Oinas, 1975). When the ideology took hold in Czechoslovakia, folklore was already a deep-rooted part of it which could be observed right from the beginning (Pavlicová, Uhlíková, 2018: 185). The union between Communism and folklore then was so tight that people would not separate between the two (Hrubá, 2016: 1:12).

Bohuslav Beneš (1965: 91-98) wrote an overview of the Soviet folklorists' discussions on the theory of contemporary folklore between 1953 and 1963. In the centralized Communist regime, even "popular" folklore was defined by the will of a handful of politically reliable people whose primary task was to promote the Communist values in their area of influence. As a Soviet satellite, the Czechoslovak regime tended to follow the lead of the USSR, as is also evident from the article. We may thus expect that when *Vítání občánek* was being



established, the creators did it with the same ideas in mind. The central motif Beneš identified was that of collectiveness, which was meant to accompany both its production and reproduction. Other characteristics included folksiness or anonymity. Similarly, in an article published in 1955, Milan Bartoš argued for the erasure of differences between professional and folk art for which the Communist regime should strive. Art, he claims, should be realistic in that it reflects the life of the masses, collective and in line with the socialist spirit. He stresses the artistic and emotional aspect of art, but also the equally important social and political influence. Art serves to educate the masses in understanding their historic role, it agitates for political objectives and encourages militant partisanship. (Bartoš, 1955: 104)

For this reason, folklore elements were also inserted into *Vítání občánek* and overwhelmingly interpreted in compliance with the Communist practice. Folklore was explicitly incorporated into *Vítání občánek* via a performance of local children. They came from local schools, pre-schools, folk-art schools (*Lidová škola umění*) or the Pioneer Organization (Knapík, Franc, 2011: 1020-1021). Their performance typically consisted of poems, songs or dances which were either came from original folklore but often were artificially created for this purpose by state-approved artists.

Another typical folk-like element was a wooden cradle. In history, this type of baby cot was common but as time progressed and more modern options became available, its use was limited apart from the poorest families in the countryside (Čečetka, 1900: 11). The cradle was also historically an important place when it comes to performing many rituals after the birth of a child. For instance, this was the place where ‘*Sudičky*’, female deities who determine one’s fate, make their predictions (Navrátilová, Verner, 2004: 52). However, it is unclear how it appeared in *Vítání občánek* nor what it is supposed to represent. Some explained its meaning “as a symbol of the ever-repeating life”<sup>7</sup> (Kučera, 2015 [1954-1989]: 144) Others found it to be a way to “localize” the event (Navrátilová, 1984: 34), that is to give it a more local and as such more attractive character.

Apart from folklore as such, appeals to continuity with the past and with the common people were also made in a more abstract manner. “*Already our ancient ancestors used to have such custom of ceremonially accepting newborn children as members of the municipality. So that they would be aware – just like their parents – that every citizen should consider their*

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<sup>7</sup> „(...) kolébka jako symbol stále se opakujícího života“

*membership to their municipality both an honour and a responsibility...*<sup>8</sup> (Kettner, 1989: 141) It is unclear which custom Josef Bartoš, deputy of the Local Committee in Hostivice, referred to in this speech by which he addressed parents. It is, however, clear that the choice of words does not come from an ancient tradition but from a typical Communist jargon. The appeal to continuity with the past and with one's historical roots is simply a means to legitimize the event and the Communist ideas.

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<sup>8</sup> „Už naši dávní předkové měli takový zvyk, že narozené děti slavnostně přijímali za členy obce. Aby si uvědomily – stejně jako jejich rodiče – že každý občan by měl považovat příslušnost ke své obci za čest i závazek...”

## 6. On the Re-Invention of Vítání občáneků

*I: “May I ask why you decided to attend Vítání občáneků with your daughter?”*

*M: “Because it’s a nice tradition.”*

*I: “And where do you know it from?”*

*M: “I don’t know.”*

*I: “You don’t know?”*

*M: “It’s simply always been done like this, since forever. People talk about it all the time, that the Welcoming took place. Everybody has been at Vítání občáneků.”*

*I: “So there wasn’t a specific moment where you would for example read about it?”*

*M: “No, not at all, people talk about it, it’s commonly known, it’s like when I go give birth to the hospital, it just... everybody goes give birth to the hospital, except for some exceptions, right. It’s just a common thing.”<sup>9</sup>*

When I asked parents about their reasons to (not) attend Vítání občáneků, the prevalent reaction was surprise that I even ask about something so obvious. In the case of the attendees, the majority of them talked about it being a “common” or “normal” thing that everybody has been doing since forever. Parents who chose not to go often thought nobody really goes to the event anymore because it is a relic of the Communist past which has nothing to offer anymore. When Prague 6 was considering the renewal of the event in 2007, which they had abandoned after the revolution, they did a survey to find out whether local citizens see it as a Communist relic and whether they are in favour of its renewal. Out of some 1300 respondents about 50 % did not think it is anachronism. (Prague 6, 2008) This seems to

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<sup>9</sup> „Můžu se zeptat, proč jste se rozhodla vzít dceru na Vítání?“ „Protože to je hezká tradice.“ „A odkud znáte tu tradici?“ „Nevím.“ „Nevíte?“ „To prostě takhle vždycky bylo odjakživa. O tom se tak prostě mluví pořád, jakože bylo vítání, každý byl na vítání občáneků, no.“ „Takže to nebylo najednou, že byste si to třeba někde přečetla?“ „Ne, vůbec ne, o tom se mluví, to je všeobecně známé, to je jako když jedu rodit do porodnice, tak prostě... každý jezdí rodit do porodnice, kromě nějakých těch výjimek, že jo. Takže taková běžná věc, no.“

confirm a great division in how the event is perceived among people which I also experienced in my research.

From the conversations I have had, an important factor seemed to be the age of the respondents. Very few young people were aware of the Communist origins, and many were ignorant of the event's existence altogether. One reason may be the fact that they are often not parents and so the topic has simply never come up. Secondly, they have lived their whole life in a democratic regime where the ceremony has not been promoted as much as before. If young people were familiar with the event, it was typically because of photos in their family album or other artefacts reminding them of their own or their relatives' welcoming.

The reasons for disliking the event were not confined only to the Communist legacy. Some found it simply "pointless" to attend as they had no particular interest in celebrating such an intimate moment with the local government. *"We didn't go and we didn't really feel the need to. I think that she was welcomed sufficiently in the family,"*<sup>10</sup> a mother said. Some people I talked to seemed genuinely appalled by the idea of participating in this and, in effect, sharing their privacy with the public. Others have however taken a less resolute attitude, contemplating various aspects and also opinions of various people. Grandparents, in particular, seemed to often give them the impulse to go or at least to seriously consider going. On the other hand, among the frequently mentioned downsides were the difficulties of attending a formal event with a newborn: *"The overall logistics with the child, having to dress and make yourself up, brush your hair, put on make-up, dress up the child, find it some little attire, somehow get here, somehow get out of here. Personally, I would not find it worth it for the half-hour. And also the stress with it if some music would start playing or somebody would start singing, the child would start crying, I would have to go somewhere to the hall to comfort it... I decided that there are simply more minuses than pluses."*<sup>11</sup>

Overall, the attitudes nowadays seem to vary greatly. While there are a number of reasons why people may be ignorant or contemptuous of the event, there is an indisputable segment of the parents who are very fond of it. The rates of participation are almost impossible to

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<sup>10</sup> „Nebyli jsme a ani nějak jako jsme necítili tu potřebu. Já myslím, že v rodině byla přivítaná dostatečně.“

<sup>11</sup> „Celková logistika s tím dítětem, nějak se oblíknout, upravit, učesat vlasy, namalovat se, oblíknout dítě, sehnat mu šatičky, nějak se sem dopravit, nějak se zase dopravit pryč... jako osobně mi to za těch, za tu půlhodinku asi nestálo a ještě ten stres s tím, že by tam pak začala hrát nějaká hudba nebo někdo by začal zpívat, to dítě by začlo plakat, já bych musela někam na chodbu, utěšovat ho... Rozhodla jsem se prostě, že mínusů je víc než plusů.“

find although from the clerks' guesses it ranges between 40-90 % depending on a variety of factors which I will discuss later. In the subsequent sub-chapters, I will give scrutinize the specific alterations which have taken place after the Velvet Revolution. The reasons why parents choose to attend the event will also be discussed at a later point (see Ch. 7).

## 6.1 Democracy and Capitalism

The political and social changes meant that the organization of the ceremony is no longer centralized and unified. Instead, municipalities gained absolute freedom in whether and how they want to perform it. As a result, a slow but steady process of differentiation and individualization of the event began to take place.

While the clerks responsible for the organization of VO often stayed the same, their way of working changed. They gained more independence and a free(r) hand in the execution of the event. At the same time, they are aware that their actions may reflect on the local government, to which they are accountable, and on the municipality as a whole which affects their decisions. For instance, some have decided to stop sending out personal invitations to the parents of newborns out of fear that it would be unwelcome. The most commonly cited situations which the clerks feared were those when a newborn passes away which the municipality does not typically learn of right away. Other situations included those where a child is put up for adoption or where the parents are not on good terms with each other. *“In the tense, emotional, hormonal time you can cause something that you don't want to,”*<sup>12</sup> said a clerk. Apart from human empathy, the reason why they choose to avoid it is because this may reflect badly on the municipality.

Although they still answer to their superiors, the local government, they need not follow the uniform plan designed by the Communist Party. As long as the changes they opt for are received positively by the attendees, they are typically at liberty to experiment. At the same time, they are not required to do so and may thus either keep doing it in almost the same way as before or discontinue the event completely. The main factors of in which direction the municipality goes seem to be two: an initiative re-inventor and interest of the public.

The change of regime significantly affected the politics even at the lowest levels. Local National Committees (MNV) which used to be made up of Communist-approved members

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<sup>12</sup> „V tom vytiženým, emočním, hormonálním období vyvoláte něco, co vyvolávat nechcete.“

transformed into municipal governments with a mayor at the head. The democratic system meant that its election became a real competition of various parties (except in the smallest villages) for the voters' favour. Freedom which allowed the voters to choose whether and who they want to vote for also extended to their choice of attending VO and even to the municipalities' choice whether and how they will organize it. This shift of accountability from the Communist party to the citizens as well as from uniformity and obligation to freedom affected the way VO is done nowadays.

A major challenge lay in adapting the event to the new political and social circumstances while maintaining the "brand" of VO which the public was familiar with. There are a number of elements which achieve this. In fact, many *signifiants* have remained the same in the ceremony even though their *signifiés* have been changed, or at least modified. Let us consider, for instance, the name of the event. In the socialist era it carried many connotations coined by the Communist propaganda. The notion of "vítání" ("welcoming") can be found in many other events and speeches of the era, including the already mentioned "Vítání jara" ("Spring Welcoming"). It was associated with the forced enthusiasm and comradeship. "Občánek" ("little citizen") was part of the attempt to promote one's state (and/or ideally communist) identity. In this way, it was highlighted that the children belong in/to the state. The connotations were boosted by the fact that its existence was an explicit attempt to eradicate baptism. It must be said, however, that gradually over time they became void of such strong connotations due to the words' overuse and people's desensitization to them.

Nowadays, "Vítání občánků" is primarily an established 'brand' which carries a connotation of familiarity as manifested in the mother's quote at the beginning of this chapter. 'Little citizen' is taken to refer to the child's residency in the municipality, rather than the whole state. The attempt to put the child's citizenship above its personal identity and familial relationships is gone. Not even those who dislike VO thought that these connotations are relevant anymore.

Attention is paid to the event being dignified and formal. The mayor or another representative of the municipality attends it in a formal suit and with the ceremonial badge on. The event is organized in the most representative location available, typically the ceremonial room if there is one, with flowers and other decorations present. Several clerks take care of the smooth course of events and everybody speaks in a warm but formal manner.

In this way, the local government try to fulfil the expectations of the attendees of how they should act. It is no longer the higher representatives of the Communist Party creating the norms and expectations. Where before Vítání občánků would almost always be described as “ceremonial” (“slavnostní”) and “joyful” (radostné”), today the most common phrase one can read in local journals or chronicles is that of a “pleasant duty” (“milá povinnost”) which the municipality or mayor claims to have.

In their speech, mayors (or other representatives) do not ponder the child’s meaning for the state nor do they discuss the obligations to raise the child in accordance with the socialist values. The parents are also not required to make any vow anymore. On the contrary, the speeches typically revolve around the child’s individuality and happiness and around the importance of family. They also often include the expression of utmost support from the part of the municipality in creating good conditions for raising a child there and hope that the newborn will spend a happy childhood there. This major shift in dynamics between the actors is a typical attribute of the whole ceremony. The local government no longer holds complete power but must rely on the voters’ favour which is gained mostly through good relations and image. Acknowledging the parents’ needs and concerns is a rational behaviour on their part in a democratic system. On the other hand, the parents – the voters – recognize the mayor’s symbolic importance as the representative of the municipality which they respect even if they do not vote or even know him or her. The symbol is something they seek and expect (see Ch. 8.1). At the same time, they are aware of their freedom in choosing to go there as well as their position as citizens and voters. As a result, they often view it as “a service”, as one father put it, which they also sometimes choose to complain about if discontent. In Prague 8, a bracelet with the initial letter of the child’s name made out of gold had to be changed, due to high costs but also due to complaints from parents whose child’s initial is small, such as an “I”, and thus less valuable. They decided to opt for a four-leaf clover out of silver as a unified gift instead. (KKV RMČ, 2015) This gift is still being given there up to today with no more complaints.

Embracing capitalism also meant privatization of companies. Patrons arranged by the inner workings of the Communist party were smoothly replaced by sponsors made up of local entrepreneurs and private companies. Their motivation to participate was likely lead by the opportunity to self-promote to their target group, that is why they are often children or parent-oriented companies or newly set-up local businesses hoping to attract local citizens.

On this example of a swift change from patrons to sponsors we can observe how smooth and inconspicuous the transition was despite being caused by great societal shifts. From the point of view of the parents, very little changed – they received promotional presents for free from a local enterprise. Local citizens who read up on the event in a local journal could also at most notice the change of wording. Behind the “scene”, however, there is free market and (somewhat more) transparent agreements between the municipality and the companies. Gradually, entrepreneurs who (partially) specialize in these events have also emerged. There are now businesses which provide cradles, decorations, flowers, photographs and videos, commemorative presents, such as coins, certificates or objects with the town’s logo on it and many other products.

Yet other elements seem to have lost all meaning, except for their role in the rite of passage, and only function as a vehicle of the sense of continuity. A prominent example of this is the signing into the commemorative book. In none of the places I visited was I able to get any explanation for why it is done. The typical answer was along the lines of “That’s just the way things are done.” As described before, it was originally an act directly copied from baptism and used as a symbol of loyalty, as part of a vow the parents made to the state (and Communist Party). Not only has none of this symbolism persisted, it also became forgotten along the way. So were the vow-taking and the role of witnesses played by Communist delegates.

Overall, these actions still form an integral part of the rite by ensuring a sense of continuity and by giving the ceremony content which is familiar to people and thus allows for a simple ritualisation. Moreover, it appeals to people’s sentimentality, particularly if they have fond memories of the previous regime. *“The good from Communism has been preserved,”*<sup>13</sup> explained a mayor the popularity of VO. At the same time, many people who are not fond of the Communist era could easily differentiate between the VO of before and the VO now by recognizing the shift in context and interpretations.

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<sup>13</sup> „To dobrý z komunismu se zachovalo.“



## 6.2 Local Community

*“This year the tradition of welcoming little citizens, which contributes to building up the relationship between the town and the citizens, will be restored,”*<sup>14</sup> announced the local journal of Hovorčovice in 2007. It demonstrates how nowadays the main bond the event aims to create is between the municipality and the citizen. This is a major shift from the original VO, where the municipality was simply a tool of the state (and the Party). Although communication and co-ordination between them persists and both constitute the public administration, municipalities are now a separate apparatus to the state and seek their own objectives.

The significance of VO for the municipalities in the present day was aptly explained by a priest I talked to: *“For the municipality, it is a tool through which they can meet the families. (...) There aren’t many opportunities for the municipality to do so. Where they can reach out to young parents, mums, express their gratitude, give them something, hold a pleasant social event.”*<sup>15</sup> For this reason, he believed the ceremony to be meaningful in this day and age and, moreover, understandable and tolerable even for him as a representative of the Church. He found the promotion of neighbourly relationships by the municipality and the support of the community life to be of such value, that it overshadowed even the anti-religious origins of the event.

The aforementioned opportunity to reach out to the parents in this way is useful for the municipality also for another reason. *„It’s definitely better when the first thing the parents receive [from the municipality] is not a payment slip for waste disposal fee but if they may participate in a social event like this where they receive a gift for the child.”*<sup>16</sup> a clerk explained to me. In Hradec Králové, this reason caused them to renew the tradition after 18 years of suspension (ČT, 2009).

Moreover, *Vítání občánků* is often used as an illustration of the growth of population in the town which the municipalities often seem to make use of, typically with communicating

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<sup>14</sup> „V letošním roce bude obnovena tradice vítání občánků, která přispívá k vytváření vztahu mezi obcí a občany.“

<sup>15</sup> „Pro tu obec je to nástroj, jak se setkat s těmi rodinami. (...) Ono těch příležitostí moc není, kdy ta obec to může udělat. Kdy má možnost ty mladé rodiče, maminky, oslovit, vyjádřit jim poděkování, něco jako dát, udělat příjemnou společenskou událost.“

<sup>16</sup> „Tak určitě je lepší, když ty rodiče jako první nedostanou složenku za odpad a když se spíš účastní takovýchle společenských akce, kde dostanou dáreček pro to dítě.“

some trend to the public. For example, a few years ago a part of the then mayor's leading article in the local journal went as follows: *"Young people in the town simply love each other and have no regard for the visions of the municipal government. The birth rate development, which we can observe at the yearly welcoming of little citizens, shows us that every year at least one class of first-years is born and that a change of this trend cannot be expected in the next ten years."*<sup>17</sup> (Novák, 2016: 2)

As mentioned before, it is difficult to measure interest of the public due to law restrictions (also see Ch. 6.4). There are however signs which attest to it. For instance, a universal condition for attending the ceremony is having the permanent address in the municipality. In the interviews, the officials disclosed that they must frequently refuse a number of those who do not fulfil the condition but hope to be allowed to attend regardless. A respondent said that parents who are on the move away from the municipality sometimes choose to change their address specifically only after their newborn's Vítání has taken place: *"We have cases like that that for example they get married and she says: 'No, no, no, until we're welcomed here, I don't want to move away. I will go change my ID and all that afterwards, after Vítání, so you can welcome us here.'"*<sup>18</sup>

Interest of the public often persists even when Vítání občanů is discontinued, as the example of Prague 6 demonstrated. It is fuelled by the citizens' memory of it from the past as well as comparison with other municipalities. This was demonstrated in an article in the journal of Prague 6 when the renewal of the ceremony was being discussed: *"'What will I tell my daughter when she asks me where her photos from Vítání are when everybody else has them?' asks Ms Michaela on the city hall website, discontent with the fact that in other municipalities Vítání takes place."* (ÚMČ Praha 6, 2007) A surprising level of interest in the ceremony by the public was also noted by many clerks and mayors I talked to. Some parents even contact them before the child is born to make sure they will be included in the ceremony. In two places I visited, the parents' unrelenting and enthused interest prevented the discontinuation of the event which the council intended: *"A few years ago there were*

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<sup>17</sup> „Mladí lidé v obci se zkrátka mají rádi a na nějaké představy vedení obce neberou ohledy. Vývoj porodnosti, jehož jsme při každoročním vítání nových občanů svědky, nám ukazuje, že každým rokem nám tu vyrůstá nejméně jedna třída prvňáčků a že změna tohoto trendu se v dalších deseti letech nedá očekávat.“

<sup>18</sup> „Máme případy, že se třeba vemou a vona řekne: ‚Ne, ne, ne, to já prostě, dokud nás nepřivítáte, tak se nechci odstěhovat. To já si budu občanku měnit a takhle až, až pak, až po vítání, ještě ať nás přivítáte tady‘.“

*some hints from the local government that it could be abolished, but they didn't get away with it. People wanted it, they were asking about it,*"<sup>19</sup>a clerk, who seemed fond of organizing the event, told me. In the other town, the clerk in charge of the event showed little enthusiasm for its organization. She told me that the reason it still takes place is the unceasing interest of the parents which the mayors want to accommodate.

### **6.3 Process of Innovating**

While the interest of the public may lead to the endurance of the event, the key role in its successful re-invention is that of the "main re-inventor". This person can be a mayor, a registrar, a clerk from the mayor's office or from a department in charge of social or cultural events. Often multiple people from the same or various departments play this role. Apart from organizing the event with enthusiasm, they typically also reflect on it deeply and make deliberate amendments to it. They introduce new elements which come from various sources of inspiration. One such inspiration is another municipality, typically a neighbouring one. This was how the tree-planting ceremony was first brought into Veselí nad Moravou or how Hovorčovice have began to plan on organizing it, as well. In the first case, it was a clerk who saw it in a neighbouring town. In the latter case, the mayor randomly came across it in a Prague quarter. In both cases, it was a chance sight. In some places, however, clerks decide to visit the ceremony of a different municipality purposefully looking for inspiration there.

Another source of inspiration, albeit only of smaller changes it seems, is the internet. This is where the organisers typically find content for their speeches or for the children's performances. It is also where companies and entrepreneurs market their ceremony-related services, such as photography, cradles and all sorts of presents which may be incorporated into the event. In Prague 6, a ritual during which a ribbon is placed on the child was inspired by a ritual conducted by Dalai Lama (Prague 6, 2008). It is likely that the source of this information was also the internet.

Another typical inspiration comes from the needs and opportunities of the municipality. The tree-planting ceremony is often, at least in part, a product of newly acquired or unused estates. In Hostivice, one impulse for the ceremony was the public's bad treatment of the town's greenery. *"Some trees would be planted here and within two days they would be*

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<sup>19</sup> "Před několika lety, byla takový nějaký náznak z vedení, že by se to mohlo zrušit, ale neprošlo to. Lidi to chtěli, dotazovali se."

*broken and destroyed. So we said to each other that if we present it as 'This is your tree.' that maybe they won't be destroyed as much and that this could be a way how to draw the public in so that they would start caring about what they walk past and that they would take interest in the greenery.*"<sup>20</sup> An interesting finding that they made is that it actually works. Presents and performances also often reflect the local options. For instance, in 2012 Dobříš decided to have the presents made by a nearby sheltered workshop (RC Dobříšek, 2012). Similarly, in many places, presents are made by a local enterprise. In Hradec Králové, they have chosen to invite the families to a local theatre to watch a thematic play (ČT, 2009). In Hovorčovice, they invite a successful professional soprano singer who comes from the town to perform there. In many places the performance is done by children from one or more schools of various types depending on their presence there and the teachers' interest.

At the same time, the organiser reflects on the success of the elements with the attendees and takes in their feedback. The elements are then either kept in their current form, amended accordingly or removed. Many clerks shared with me their personal discoveries which they have made in this way. In Prague 8, for instance, they have found out that what works best to calm the newborns is the sound of the organ. In Hostivice, they discovered that a performance of kindergarten children serves to achieve this same goal better than that of school children. It is the tree-planting ceremony, in particular, that allows for informal conversations between the administration and the public. In Hostivice, it even gave rise to the invention of another tradition – the so-called “dudlíkovník” (“pacifier tree”), a tree on which toddlers can hang up their pacifiers when they are learning to let go of them. This idea was brought forth by a mother at the tree-planting ceremony where she could approach the clerks and the mayor who promptly made it happen.

While formality during the ceremony is meaningful and desired by many parents, there also seems to be demand for a more informal, relaxed event. In Prostiboř, they decided to re-design the ceremony in this way with the vision of a friendly neighbourly get-together in mind. (Šavlová, 2021). In other places, this is achieved via a follow-up tree-planting ceremony where refreshments and entertainment are prepared by the municipality. In Veselí nad Moravou, folk music is played, whereas in Hostivice they opt for the typically Czech

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<sup>20</sup> „Tady se tehdy vysadily stromy a do dvou dnů byly olámaný, byly zničený, takže jsme si říkaly, že když jakoby dáme, že tohle je váš strom, takže třeba se to nebude jako tolik ničit a že je to jako způsob, jak trochu tu veřejnost přitáhnout k tomu, aby jí nebylo jedno kolem čeho chodí a aby jí ta zeleň zajímala.“

grilling of sausages. In both of these places that I visited, there was plenty of pastry, sweets and beverages prepared. In the previous years, according to respondents, activities for older children were also employed. This way of celebration may be preferred by many parents today. It may be part of a greater trend, noted by a priest I talked to, of relaxing traditional events. This may be also observed in weddings which many people now prefer to do neither in church nor at municipal premises, but for instance in one's own garden.

As democracy has allowed for more creativity in the ceremony, some have decided to make it more attractive and meaningful by incorporating some old traditions and symbol(ism)s. In Prague 6, for instance, they decided to overshadow the Communist legacy by taking inspiration in "*real rituals of ancient history*"<sup>21</sup> (Prague 6, 2008). New rituals stemming from folklore and myths can be found in many places now. In some places, the so-called 'sudičky' (folk deities) are played by three women who stand around the cradle and wish the child good luck. Sometimes they even perform a play (ČT, 2009). This is based on old traditional beliefs in which these deities influenced and predicted the child's fate (e.g. Čečetka, 1900: 10) In the tree-planting ceremony, in particular, symbolisms are employed when considering the types and placement of the trees. The symbolism is however based more on new interpretations taken from the internet for entertainment.

## 6.4 Novel Elements

Hand in hand with the shift to democracy and capitalism came many other processes, values and norms, at the time common in the West. Among them were for instance globalization, environmentalism and rapid technological development.

Among the global movements which made their impact on the event are those connected with environmentalism as evidenced in the associated tree-planting rituals. While these added ceremonies were invented and introduced independently of the global movement – their origin can be traced back to the Communist era and nowadays they spread from town to town by inspiration – in some cases the municipality chooses to organize them in co-operation with activist organizations. For instance, in Veselí nad Moravou, they decided to co-operate with the initiative 'Sázíme budoucnost' which aims to plant 10 million trees in the Czech Republic. Hoping to mitigate the effects of climate change, they support and

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<sup>21</sup> „Rituál (...) vychází ze skutečných rituálů v dávné minulosti.“

connect people all around the republic to plant and grow the trees effectively and meaningfully (Sázíme budoucnost ©2019-2023). Importance of nature was also often stressed in the invitations and official speeches: „*We will be very happy if you join this project and by joint efforts support the planting of greenery in our town,*“ wrote the local journal in Veselí nad Moravou as part of an invitation to the tree-planting ceremony aimed at new parents (Veselské listy, 2019: 4). The opportunity to “*contribute to the nature*” as one mother put it was an aspect that some parents considered as a nice bonus of the event, although not everyone was keen on being part of an activist project.

The dawn of new technologies, such as cell phones and the internet, brought about new possibilities of enhancement but also complications for VO. The biggest obstacle came with the introduction of new laws protecting personal data, national ones but later also those at the level of the European Union (known as the “GDPR”). While Vítání občánek and similar events were not the primary target, they were impacted by it. The laws have changed multiple times throughout the years. At one point the registrar could not legally access the register of citizens for the purpose of sending invitations to newborns and their parents unless given their explicit permission.

Even though the registrar knew the information due to using it for other purposes, she or he was not allowed to use it. This created a bizarre situation particularly in smaller towns and villages where everybody knew about all newborns anyway but legally the clerks could not act on it. Even in bigger towns, registrars felt disconcerted that although they have to access the register for other reasons, they cannot use the information they know anyway for this innocuous purpose. Particularly in bigger towns, many parents did not become aware of the ceremony and the participation rates immediately significantly dropped (ČT24, 2015). As a result, in some places, they even decided not to organize VO anymore due to the complications (ČT, 2013).

Since then, the laws have changed to accommodate situations like this. The Ministry of the Interior now specifies that Vítání občánek may be considered “a municipal event which serves to support the life of the municipality as a community of citizens” and as such fulfils the conditions of both the law on municipalities and the GDPR. Personal data of citizens may thus be used for this (but only for this) purpose. (MVČR, ©2023) In practice, however, the approaches very much differed across the places I visited. A major reason seemed to be

ignorance of this new permission, probably due to the many legal changes in recent years and complexity of the laws.

Others found the options allowed by the current legislation too restrictive, and so decided to either give up certain parts of the ceremony or gain the parents' permission anyway just to be sure. In Hostivice, for instance, signs with the children's names are no longer put up next to their trees as they used to. They explained that *„at the beginning we used to have memorial plaques engraved which were installed at the place where the trees were planted. It meant one more GDPR permission for us. But to abide by the law, we must be ready to remake the plaque at any time, when anybody re-considers the permission and takes it back.“*<sup>22</sup>

Overall, in the majority of places I visited the parents were asked to sign an agreement with the use of their personal data at some point, typically either as part of application or when signing the commemorative book. Submitting an application is usually required of parents in bigger municipalities where the level of anonymity is higher. In some places, the parents may also choose what use of their personal data they want to consent to, such as the name and a photo of their child being shared on social media. In Prague 8, for instance, only about two thirds of the parents agree to their child's name being announced in the local journal according to a clerk.

An advantage which new technologies, specifically popularization of the internet, facilitated was a different mode of communication between the municipality and citizens. All municipalities now have a website where they put all important information and, in some cases, the application form for the event. As most new parents nowadays are proficient internet users, they often search for the event themselves and learn all they need there. This has made communication easier and more comfortable for both the parents as well as the clerks, particularly in bigger towns and cities. In smaller towns and villages, there still seems to be preference for personal, postal and/or phone communication. In addition to that, invitations are also published in the local journals, sometimes with a reference to the website for more information or application. According to a clerk in Prague 8, when applying through e-mails was made available, the public interest in the event rose significantly.

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<sup>22</sup> „My jsme ze začátku nechávali vyrýt pamětní desky, který se dávaly na to místo, kde se sázelo, s tím, že je to jeden GDPR souhlas. A abysme dodrželi zákon, tak musíme být připravení kdykoliv tu desku předělat, když si kdokoliv ten souhlas rozmyslí a stáhne.“

An advancement in technological development also brought about the option to shoot videos, so in some places professional cameramen or local television channels became involved in the event. Photos and, in some cases also videos, became often shared on the municipalities' social media, sometimes even featuring in the mayors' self-promotional posts. At the same time, cameras and cell phones soon became commonly used by the attendees, as well. Their use differed very much at the ceremonies I visited. Sometimes only a few photos were taken by somebody here and there and rather discreetly at that. At other times it seemed that each family is either filming or taking photos, with some even running around to capture everything.

## **6.5 Back to the Church**

An interesting development can be observed in some places where the ceremony has been moved to a local church. In the cases I familiarized myself with this was done mostly due to three factors – firstly, the increase in population and births, secondly, the lack of another spacious and ceremonious location and thirdly, minimal religious interest in the church due to a high level of secularization.

Both the town of Hovorčovice and the village of Holovousy originally organized Vítání občanů elsewhere – at the townhall and in the local library, respectively. It was not until the 2010s that they tried to move it to the church. Respondents from both municipalities reported that the number of churchgoers is very low and regular service does not take place there. Making use of the church in this way thus seemed a logical option, especially since it is one of the most important symbols of the municipality and its history.

Over time, as I was informed by a Holovousy respondent, the church has become a “*cultural shrine*” (“*kulturní stánek*”) of the town which otherwise has no community centre where more people could fit:

*“It occurred to us to try it in the church. But the first year, it was done with a lot of apprehension. Because not even the concerts and all that was that commonly done there, it was all only beginning, this way of using the church space. (...) Now I would say that people find it less and less church-like, in the sense of spirituality and all that stuff. Since so many local events are held there, concerts,*



*even in the summer, and the church is open very often, people have embraced it as a cultural shrine and I think that today nobody really thinks twice about it.*"<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, the municipality representatives from Hovorčovice talked about the meaning of the church as a cultural monument and a historical ceremonious place that unites the town and its citizens despite their overwhelming non-religiosity: *"For us, there's certain symbolism in it. [It's] actually the only big attraction [here]. For the people, for the public. So we want it to look a bit presentable."*<sup>24</sup> The atmosphere and symbolic meaning of the church as the *"cultural shrine"* is so significant that the administration of Hovorčovice plans to continue organizing Vítání občánků there despite the fact that a new spacious location has been constructed elsewhere in the meantime. *"We could do it there, but we don't want to. It's nicer there, in the church,"* they explained.<sup>25</sup>

A priest I talked to explained to me that the attitude of the municipality to the church is what he finds most important in this context. Given the high level of secularization in many, particularly Bohemian, regions, he considers this as an opportunity for people to form a relationship with the church. *"This is what I care about, that the municipality identifies with the church, at least as a significant cultural monument. (...) And the fact that [local citizens] can come to the church is a way of establishing a relationship with the church, if only as a significant monument if the dimension of the faith, which they don't practice as much, isn't there."*<sup>26</sup> Unlike in the case of secular weddings, for Vítání občánků priests do not need to ask the bishop for formal permission. A reluctance to give it in the case of weddings may stem from the fact that it may lead to confusion. 'A church wedding' is automatically understood as 'a Church wedding', a priest explained to me. *"This would cause some confusion or mistaking of the ceremony. And it is quite a difference if the wedding was*

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<sup>23</sup> Napadlo nás, že to teda zkusíme v kostele. Ale ten první rok byl hodně s obavama. Protože tam ani ještě nebyly zas tak častý ty besídky, teprve se to všechno rozjíždělo, ten způsob využití těch prostor kostela. (...) A teď bych řekla, že jim to přijde, čím dál míň jako kostelní, když to tak řeknu ve smyslu víry a takovejch těhle věcí. Že tím, jak se tam pořádá spousta těch obecních akcí, od koncertů, i v létě, a ten kostel je otevřenější hodně často, tak ty lidi to vzali opravdu jako takovej ten kulturní stánek a myslím si, že dneska už to vůbec nikdo neřeší."

<sup>24</sup> "Pro nás je to určitá symbolika. Vlastně jediná velká nějaká atrakce [tady]. Pro ty lidi, pro veřejnost. Takže chceme, aby to trošku vypadalo."

<sup>25</sup> „Mohli bysme to tam dělat, ale nechceme. Je to hezčí tam v tom kostele.“

<sup>26</sup> „To je to, na čem mi záleží, aby se obec hlásila ke kostelu, minimálně jako k významné kulturní památce. (...) Takže vlastně i to, že [místní občané] můžou přijít do toho kostela, tak je nějaký získání vztahu k tomu kostelu jako k nějaké významné, alespoň, památce, jo, když tam není nějaký ten rozměr víry, kterou, třeba tak nepraktikují.“

*[Catholic] or civil. Whereas if somebody says that they had a Vítání občánek in the church, nobody will understand it to mean that they had baptism in the church,*”<sup>27</sup> he said.

There is a difference in attitudes between Hovorčovice and Holovousy to the church which be explained by the level of secularization and the fact that in Holovousy, the church belongs to the municipality whereas in Hovorčovice to the Catholic Church. Correspondingly, in the case of Hovorčovice, there is an effort to show respect to it. *“We emphasize it in the speeches, that we esteem it, when we are welcoming [the newborns], that it is a connection of the tradition of baptism, the religious one, with today, that we are welcoming them and that we are glad that they take it like this, without problems.”*<sup>28</sup>

This new dimension of care for the local community and the public space seems to be the result of the emancipation of municipalities after the Revolution as well as contemporary post-secular tendencies. The unique harmonization of material interests and moral (and religious) values of various dissimilar actors in a highly individualized society gives insight into a practicable post-secular development.

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<sup>27</sup> „Tak to by došlo přitom trochu k zmatení nebo záměně toho obřadu. A v tom je docela rozdíl, jestli ta svatba byla církevní nebo civilní. Kdežto jestli se řekne, že někdo měl vítání občánek v kostele, tak se rozhodně nemyslí, že měli křest v kostele.“

<sup>28</sup> „A my to v těch projevech zdůrazňujem, že si to považujem, když je vítáme, že je to spojení tý tradice, křtění dětí, tý církevní, s dneškem, že je vítáme a že jsme rádi, že to takhle berou bezproblémově.“

## 7. The Unchanging Aspects of Vítání občánků

Although so far I regarded Vítání občánků before 1989 and after 1989 as two separate products, there is a shared basis (and history) which defines it. The focus of this chapter will be on the permanent qualities of the ceremony which go beyond the political. Many of these elements also play a crucial role in communicating with the target audience on a more profound, emotional and symbolic level.

### 7.1 Attendance

In its core, Vítání občánků is a rite of passage. This remained true at all points of its existence, including the times when nobody really attended it yet. A fact in need of acknowledgment is that there is space for multiple rites of passage to co-exist next to each other and be meaningfully celebrated. People who have chosen to baptise their child did not seem to be automatically less likely to attend Vítání občánků. *“If there is one thing that the Communists failed to do, it was to pit it against baptism,”*<sup>29</sup> said a priest I talked to. Instead of creating a substitution, VO became a separate, unrelated option for people to fulfil the needs which baptism could not satisfy and vice versa. As a result, it continues to be celebrated even in the more religious regions of the Czech Republic, such as South Moravia, and even in Slovakia. For those who choose to attend both, baptism remains the more important rite of passage between the two, but it is not seen as a competition (for many people, in any case). It involves different people, elements and meanings and last but not least, it is simply another opportunity to get together and celebrate.

The conflict between two institutions as regards rites of passage is not a new occurrence. For example, in the Czech and Moravian lands of 19<sup>th</sup> century, instances, such as the birth of a child, would cause old pagan and folk beliefs to resurface and undermine the authority of the otherwise dominant Catholic Church. Folk celebrations of mothers' re-initiation into the society were so great that the Church eventually established an event of “introduction into the church” (“úvod do kostela”) hoping to compel people to at least celebrate it in a more dignified, Catholic manner. Instead, people merged the popular feast with the Church introduction. (Navrátilová, Verner, 2004: 129-140) However, over the course of history, both Christian and folk rites and beliefs co-existed parallel to each other and to a certain

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<sup>29</sup> „Jestli se něco komunistům nepodařilo, tak to jako postavit proti tomu křtu.“

extent would influence one another. For instance, a child who died before baptism was believed to turn into a marsh fairy (*bludička*). (ibid.: 75) The attempted replacement of baptism with VO underwent a similar journey, in a way. At the time of its creation, the Communist party naturally did not appreciate the fact that some parents attend both events and attempted to persuade them by opulence and elaborate organization (Knapík, Franc, 2011: 1020-1021)<sup>30</sup>. Even though people embraced it to some extent, their attachment to the old ways was so strong, especially in a moment of so much change and uncertainty, that they were not easily swayed from it. Both in the case of old folk beliefs at the time of Catholic hegemony, and in the case of baptisms and other religious rituals it seemed to be predominantly elder people and women who played the crucial role in their endurance. Specifically, it was mid-wives, typically experienced women, who performed many folk rituals during and after the birth of a child (Navrátilová, Verner, 2004: 61-71; Vojancová et al., 1995: 14-15). The Church even made mid-wives take an oath not to do that which they would often take but afterwards ignore (partly due to low level of education but also due to their strong belief in the rituals' potency) (Navrátilová, Verner, 2004: 66-67). When it came to baptisms, young people would often only baptise their child due to the insistence of their own parents. Elder women in particular would exert social pressure on others (including their colleagues) to baptise their children. (Navrátilová, 1984) These groups are connected to the rites on the symbolic level in a more profound way than the rest of society due to their social role and lack of power. Although I do not have data on who the people who continue to show interest in VO *en masse* are, based on my research I would presume them to be representants of these very same groups – elder people and women (particularly new grandmothers and mothers).

Attendance of VO also seemed to be connected with the size of the municipality and strength of community. In the smallest municipalities (in my study it was Holovousy of some 500 and Hovorčovice of 2,700 residents<sup>31</sup>), the community is typically close-knit and so the level of anonymity is very low. The local administration is also smaller and the people who lead

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<sup>30</sup> This clumsy attempt is aptly and humorously described by Milan Kundera in *The Joke (Žert)*. Through the eyes of Ludvík in chapter V, he captures the contrived opulence and forced Communist orations at the event. When a clerk from the Committee for Civil Issues tries to explain VO to Ludvík, we can witness the desperation of the Communist Party as it struggles to outdo and replace baptism. This is one of the rare and first (if not the very first) occurrence of a popularisation of VO in Czechoslovak literature and cinema. I would like to thank Dr. Testa who brought the scene in both the novel and Jaromil Jireš's 1968 movie to my attention.

<sup>31</sup> All municipality population figures come from the 2021 Census by the Czech Statistical Office (CZSO, 2021a).

it are often not doing it out of interest in politics but because “somebody has to do it”. Even if multiple political parties exist there, their members do not necessarily consider each other as antagonists. Communication between them as well as with the voters often flows through unofficial paths and is more neighbourly than strictly formal. The elected officials, including mayors, seem to take interest in the organization of social events, including VO. They can thus personally invite every family and accommodate their needs. In Holovousy, they “monitor bellies” to see whether and how many children will be born and plan the ceremonies accordingly. The level of attendance also seems to be the highest in the smallest towns, according to my respondents’ guesses somewhere between 80-100 % depending primarily on the children’s illnesses.

In bigger municipalities (in my study towns of Dobříš, Hostivice, Kralupy nad Vltavou, Rakovník and Veselí nad Moravou between approx. 9,000 and 55,000 residents), the role of the local government diminishes although they still sometimes come up with new ideas or enjoy participating in the ceremony. Unlike in the first case, they are true political actors who have reached their position through regular political competition. As such, the event serves as a political tool for them to communicate with voters and as self-promotion. Instead, it is one or multiple clerks who do most (if not all) of the organization and preparation. They are typically registrars, secretaries to the mayor or employees from appropriate departments. The communication between the government and the clerks, but also between the municipality as such and the residents is more formal but still fluent enough. One clerk described the level of anonymity as being too anonymous for them to know everybody personally but not very anonymous in that they learn of people’s experience of the ceremony by hearsay.

Cities are typically divided into several quarters or districts. Sometimes the VO is organized by the central administration (for instance in Olomouc, approx. 106 000 residents) and sometimes each district organizes it on its own (for instance Prague, 1,3 million residents or Plzeň, approx. 174 000 residents). The level of anonymity is extremely high. It is difficult to speak of “local community” as the city and often even its districts are too large. People who (factually, permanently) live there often have the strongest ties to and with their neighbourhoods which however do not necessarily correspond with the official districts. The government are (in most cases) genuinely political figures whose work schedule is too busy because in addition to the responsibility of administering a large district they have to

coordinate their decisions with other districts and the central authority. While in many cases they still like to avail themselves of the opportunity to make an appearance at VO, the organizational aspect is in the hands of the designated clerks, typically clerks or employees from appropriate departments. The communication between all actors is formal and they are very detached from each other. This means that people do not reach out to the city hall often even in cases where the organisers would have been happy to accommodate their needs. Organisers also do not receive much feedback from the attendees by which they could go. Any bigger changes that they would like to do must go through the bureaucratic system which is lengthy and complicated.

## 7.2 Aggregating Elements of Rite of Passage in VO

*“I myself was welcomed as a little citizen. I have that classic photo in the family album,”* a priest told me. A photograph of the newborn in a historical cradle is one of the most common elements of Vítání občánků both before and after 1989. It is also one of the most popular parts of it and for many parents it is the main appeal of the ceremony. Not only does it make for nice photos, it often carries an even deeper meaning because in many families newborns of all generations have the same photo in the same cradle.<sup>32</sup> Some clerks also told me that parents often express interest in the ceremony and the photo in advance, sometimes already during pregnancy.

The knowledge of one’s having been welcomed seems to typically come from this photo being in the family album. Presents from the ceremony may also serve this purpose. A mother for instance told me about her daughter’s doll which they call “Vítačka” (“Welcomerette”) because she received it at her Vítání občánků. She still keeps it although she is an adult now. It is likely that a tree may function similarly in places where they hold the tree-planting ceremony. During this ritual, the parents (with the aid of a professional company or town services) plant a tree for their child. Unlike the historical traditions, where an individual birth was celebrated like this, the Communist tree-planting was a collective activity despite the fact that each child received its own, individual tree. (Navrátilová, 1984: 34) In Holovousy, where this custom was performed approximately from 1978 to 1989, a

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<sup>32</sup> This is shown in a TV news segment (ČT24, 2020) but it also came up very often in the interviews I had with numerous attendees.

bottle with the name of the child was attached to the tree. Nowadays, in some places, a plaque with the child's name is placed on or by it.

Rituals concerning the planting or otherwise employing a tree when a child is born were present historically in various cultures. In the Czech lands the type of tree planted used to differ depending on the region and so did its symbolism (e.g. Navrátilová, Verner, 2004: 60). I was unable to discern whether similar symbolism was employed during *Vítání občánků* during the socialist period or even whether any continuation to the folk traditions was acknowledged or even known, although it is unlikely due to the fact that it seemed to be performed in other countries under the Soviet sphere of influence.<sup>33</sup> Nowadays, the symbolism is re-emerging with parents choosing which tree they want for their child based on its (typically numbered) position or type. The symbolism of the tree is either written on the certificates they receive or they look it up on the internet. Frequent choices regarding the numbers were those related to the child's birthday or 'lucky numbers'. Some parents even decided to invent the special meaning after they were assigned a number.

The tree then often becomes a popular destination of walks for the family. *"People even go there and really even water the tree, they come to see it, and they even notify us if it is withering away,"*<sup>34</sup> a clerk told me. Another respondent confirmed this: *"We really know it faster from them. If the tree is damaged, withered, then we know it faster from them. And I, [from where I live], I see it from my window that they go there with a pram, with a watering can, and they water it."*<sup>35</sup> Parents have told me that unless the tree is planted too far away from where they live – because it often must be on the outskirts of the town due to space limitations – they are planning on taking care of the tree or that they already do in case they have already experienced it with another child.

A general consensus on the meaning of the ceremony was that the tree symbolizes the life of the child (sometimes they are even called "trees of life"): *"Today we will symbolize our joy from the birth of our children by planting a new tree. And all of us who already have*

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<sup>33</sup> A tree-planting ceremony performed as part of a Communist ceremony can be observed also in other countries, such as Lithuania's name-giving ceremony called *Vardynos* (Petkūnas, 2013: 100). Navrátilová (1984: 34) calls it a "new tendency" which people often did not accept very well, so a direct continuation with the folk traditions seems unlikely.

<sup>34</sup> „Ty lidí si tam i chodí a opravdu si třeba ten strom zalejevají, chodí se na něj dívat, i nám nahlásí třeba, jestli někde něco neuschlo.“

<sup>35</sup> „No třeba od nich fakt víme rychlejš, když je poničený, uschlý, tak to víme rychlejš od nich. A já ještě [jak bydlím v \*\*\*], tak já vyloženě vidím z okna, že tam jdou s kočárem, s konví, zalévají.“

*some experience with it know that both trees and children need to be looked after so that they would grow properly, mature and make us happy. And that is exactly what I want to wish you. May your children as well as trees bring you only joy.*"<sup>36</sup> An aspect of rites of passage is to accept one's life trajectory, from birth to death. The tree is a metaphor and materialization of it. From its early years, the child is thus made aware of its own journey through life by relating to the tree and being informed and reminded of the moment when it was planted (and the child born and welcomed) and by observing how it is growing.

Despite the name of the ceremony focusing on the child, in many ways it could seem like it is rather a parent-welcoming ceremony. The majority of acts are either directed at or performed by the parents. Parents with their newborns typically sit in the front or in some other prominent seats and they carry out multiple rituals, such as receiving presents, signing into the commemorative book, taking photos with the child in the cradle or planting the trees. Speeches often revolve around the good and the bad that awaits them in their new role. Advice on how to raise their child is typically shared, and during the Communist era they had to (at least in some places at some point) take a vow promising to raise their child in accordance with socialist values. On the other hand, the speakers also often express gratitude for the parents' choice to have the child and raise it well. Much time is also spent talking about the beauty of parenthood and the joy that the child brings them.

A significant aspect of this all is the fact that their role and identity throughout the ceremony is confined strictly to their parenthood. Nobody asks their age, education, profession, place of origin or interests – 18-year-old parents sit next to 45-year-old ones, first-timers next to experienced ones, poor next to rich ones. Their names are rarely ever said, unlike their children's, but they are often called the familiar titles of "Mum" and "Dad" or simply "parents". *"I introduce to you [Jan Novák] with [his] parents,"* introduces the registrar in Rakovník each child to the mayor at one point in the ceremony. The parents only appear as the unnamed complement to the child's fully and formally pronounced yet which may look paradoxical given the fact that the newborn is not likely to even recognize its own name yet. In a way, it may be regarded as a small act of status reversal which some scholars discern in

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<sup>36</sup> „Symbolicky radost z narození našich dětí dneska symbolizujeme zasazením nového stromu. A všichni, kdo s tím máme nějakou zkušenost už, tak víme, že jak o stromy, tak o děti je zapotřebí pečovat, aby správně rostly, uzrávaly a dělaly nám jenom radost a to je přesně to, co vám chci popřát. Ať vám vaše děti a stejně tak i ty stromy dělaly jenom radost.“



the liminal phase of rites of passage. The status reversal serves to “reaffirm the order of structure; they also restore relations between the actual historical individuals who occupy positions in that structure (Turner, 1997 [1969]: 177)

In all ceremonies I have attended, the children’s names play a key role. They are either introduced by them to the mayor or the mayor takes the time in their speech to welcome each child individually by pronouncing the name. A mayor confessed to me that it is sometimes difficult to observe the formality as one instinctively wants to use diminutives to address the babies. “*But that is how it is,*” she said. “*It has to have some official part*”<sup>37</sup>. Navrátilová and Verner acknowledge that the way the rituals used to be carried out may seem rather contrived or affected to a modern person (2004: 74). This was also reflected in an interview I lead with a mother who decided not to attend Vítání občánků. She conceded that she might have gone if the ceremony had been “*a little bit less formal, so that it would not be so ‘constrained’*”, but “*at the town hall, I just find it a bit too reserved and starchy*”.<sup>38</sup> Yet, for many parents this rigidity, or formality, is still important. “*Yes, alright, we may say that the mayor’s speech may not be that important from the parents’ perspective, but... as a matter of fact, the parents who come are those interested in the officialism,*”<sup>39</sup> an organiser told me. Historically, the rigid observance of the rituals was an important part of the “rural etiquette”, a sign of general moral awareness and a means to good relationships within the local community (Navrátilová, Verner, 2004: 74). Nowadays, it may serve as a sign of continuity with the Communist past, as these were characteristic attributes of the Communist manners, or due to the need to highlight the singularity of the moment.

The overall atmosphere is thus festive and joyful, but in a formal way. The majority of attendees are dressed up, best of all the newborns. Special or festive dresses were equally important in historical rites of passages, such as baptism or ‘introduction’, including the child’s (Čečetka, 1900: 11). It is also a sign of the shared reassurance of how special the moment is. Moreover, it urges the attendees to make preparations for the event heightening their expectations and excitement. The event takes place in the best room available to the town hall which is sometimes decorated with flowers or thematic adornments. Many

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<sup>37</sup> „Ale tak to je. Musí to mít nějakou oficiální část.“

<sup>38</sup> „Možná by se mi to líbilo, kdyby to bylo jako trošku míň formální, aby to prostě nebylo jako taková, jako v uvozovkách křeč.“ „Akorát na tý radnici mi to přijde takový moc strohý a škrobený.“

<sup>39</sup> „Jako, dobře, projev pana starosty, můžeme si říct, že z pohledu rodičů třeba není až tak podstatný, ale vlastně na tohle jdou rodiče, který tu oficialitu chtějí.“

municipalities have also become well-equipped to accommodate a crowd of babies: there are often places designed for the parents to park their prams or change nappies. All these subtle elements serve to highlight the focal point of the ceremony, the newborns.

For the rest of the family, friends, neighbours and officials present, witnessing the ceremony also serves as a rite of passage. The close family, such as grandparents and aunts and uncles, are also typically included in the main speech where they are welcomed and called on to aid the parents in raising the child. Just like parents, they are also only referred to by their relation to the child. That in itself may be an important moment for many of them, especially if they are still very young and active, as a sense of officialty is given to their role when strangers treat them like this. This already happens right at the beginning when an official shows them their seats reserved for grandparents. Apart from the main speech and casual small talks in-between, their role is then re-emphasized when professional photographs are taken. The professional photographer again refers to everybody by their relation to the child who is at the centre of attention.

The child is also being symbolically welcomed into the whole community, which refers to the municipality or, in the past, the state. The community as such also undergoes this rite of passage. They are symbolically represented by the council or committee which welcomes the child. Moreover, they are notified through media, such as local journals, local TVs, public address systems, Facebook and other social media. There they are given information about the event which nowadays typically features photos and names of the welcomed children. A mayor told me that this is something that simply must be done because of the elderly women in the town who are all very interested in knowing who was born. And so while they are not present at the event, the local community are still included through other means. In Holovousy, the local government sits down after each VO, opens up a bottle of wine and toasts to the welcomed children. The rite of passage is in this way extended past the official ceremony to a place where the families are not even present.

### **7.3 Universal Values**

The birth of a child is a truly life-changing moment. The great significance of it is deeply felt by everybody involved, most of all the parents themselves. The need for rites of passage stems from the confusion and insecurity which accompanies such a fundamental change. The rite of passage facilitates the transition and adaptation to the new situation. For these

reasons, it follows a predictable, easily understandable structure, language and symbols. It appeals to basic truths and universal values which everybody understands often on an abstract, emotional level.

Naturally, an important and omnipresent value was that of parenthood, the love for one's child. This is mentioned in the speech, symbolized in presents and various actions both before and now. The content of the speech as well as children's poems or songs, if there are any, are primarily directed at the parents and their new roles. Common themes include the description of happiness and joy that a child represents, accentuation of the importance of the parents but also broader community's roles in raising the child and congratulations and best wishes for the child. A theme I found particularly interesting was giving advice from the position of an experienced parent which the mayor (or another person from the government giving the speech) typically is. Sometimes current insecurities were acknowledged, such as when a newborn burst into tears and a distressed mother struggled to calm him or her. The deputy mayor took the opportunity to say that it is all right and that it is a common experience that all parents, including her, share. Afterwards she mentioned other similar situations in her speech discussing the universality and normality of the experience. In other places, this matter was talked about in more abstract terms but the message was similar: a natural part of parenting is disobedience and misbehaviour of the child, often you will be worried or annoyed but overall, children are a delight and worth it. The broader community, grandparents in particular, were often asked to aid the parents in raising the child.

Another, in a way more ambiguous value was that of being, or rather raising the child into, "a good person" or a variation of thereof. It is typically described in very vague, general terms. That is probably because it aims to appeal to a common-sense, universal understanding of what a "good person" is.

A frequent motif are confirmations of traditional gender roles. This is often apparent from the seating order already, which is (or rather has been) typically diligently overseen by the clerks. Historically, mothers were typically seated at the front with their newborn children cradled in their arms. Fathers would sit or stand behind them with the rest of the family in the back. In this way, the prominent role of the woman as the most important person in the child's life and the person responsible for caring for it. The father sitting behind them is

visually diminished as if assigned the role of a passive protector, but not an active primary carer. The roles are then reinforced when the mother is singled out and ceremoniously given a flower. This seating plan is still very common nowadays, although in some places they prefer to make the parents sit next to each other. In yet other places, they switch between these two models based on the number of attendees. Giving flowers to the mother is still a universal part of the ceremony.

From the speeches at a tree-planting ceremony:<sup>40</sup>

Speaker A: “...and now you may begin planting and burying the trees in soil. So, dear parents, get down to work!”

Speaker B: “Especially to all the dads, I’m rooting for you! Thoroughly fill it with soil, water it, so that it grows!” (As an afterthought, taking a look at the grandparents’ laughing faces:) “Granddads will lend a hand!”

As indicated by the citation, fathers were singled out during the tree-planting ceremonies where they were called upon to do the hard work and plant the trees. “*They show off in front of the family who stands around and cheers them on and so they do all the hard work,*”<sup>41</sup> an employee of the company, which provides professional assistance during the ceremony, told me. For this reason, the employees are keen on this event even though they have to do all the extra preparations and corrections as well as assist the parents. From my observations at the events, the fathers came prepared for this, wearing appropriate clothes and shoes, and acted just as the employee described. Sometimes they were assisted by the grandfathers or elder children. In the meantime, the mothers and other relatives would stand around taking care of the newborn, chatting and taking photos.

A prominent instance of gendering can be also found in the poems and songs performed by little children. They often include stereotypically gendered statements about both the children and various members of the family. For example, in a poem a child recited in 2014 in Rakovník, a wish is expressed that baby girls be “like dolls, pretty, nice, smiley, cheerful and always healthy.” (Jiřinec, 2014: 1:50) On the other hand, baby boys are bid only good

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<sup>40</sup> A: „...a už nyní může začít ona výsadba, zaházení stromů. Takže milí rodiče, pusťte se do toho!“ B: „Hlavně tatínkové, držím vám palce! Pořádně to zaházet, zalít, ať to roste! Dědečci vypomůžou!“

<sup>41</sup> „Předváděj se před tou rodinou, která stojí okolo a povzbuzuje je, takže tu nejtěžší práci udělej oni.“

health. In some places, the presents and/or certificates given to the children come in two versions – a pink one for girls and a blue one for boys.<sup>42</sup>

I noticed a lot of gendering also from the part of the parents, particularly in how they dressed up their children who were always the best dressed ones in the whole room. Little girls often wore tiny princess-like dresses, typically in white, pink or red colours, whereas boys were dressed in blueish rompers or tiny suit-like outfits, sometimes complete with a bow tie imitation. In some cases, a noticeable difference in attitude could be observed between the parents. While the majority of couples seemed equally enthused, here and there a disparate pair could be seen. In those cases, the woman was all dressed-up and excited while the man was dressed inappropriately for the occasion, which made for striking contrast. When I talked to the couple, the man was often looked reluctant or even annoyed. In several cases during the interviews when I asked after their motivations for coming, the man would outright tell me that he did not want to come or that he considers it “a formality”. The mothers would look disappointed at that and try to moderate the words:

*Me: “What do you expect from the ceremony?”*

*Father: “Sort of a formality.”*

*Me: “A formality?”*

*Mother: “Well no, that’s not true, we were actually looking forward to this.”<sup>43</sup>*

This overall gendering process is in line with the common view of fathers as financial providers above all else and mothers as devoted primary caregivers (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2019). Mothers are the ones most profoundly affected by the birth of a child as their roles before and after it are often unimaginably different. In addition to coping with the difficult transition of roles, for stay-at-home mothers this is a rare opportunity to socialize and attend a formal event.

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<sup>42</sup> Historically, the most meaningful colour during this occasion (apart from white) seemed to be red which symbolized life, love and the protection against evil forced. It featured for instance on the embroideries of the cloths employed. (e.g. Čečetka, 1900: 11; Langhammerová, 2017: 18-21; Motlová, 2016: 121; Navrátilová, Verner, 2004: 84-85; Vojancová et al., 1995: 16-17). There were however many regional differences as to the colours used (ibid.) We can even find the blue for boys and pink or red for girls tradition in some regions, such as Chodsko or Hornácko (Langhammerová, 2017: 19).

<sup>43</sup> „Co od toho očekáváte?“ „Taková formalita“ „Formalita?“ „Ale ne, náhodou ne, my jsme se sem těšili.“

While the socialist state officially promoted women's emancipation and gender equality as an integral value, in reality, both the Czechoslovak society and the Communist Party adhered to these traditional roles, as well (e.g. Nečasová et al., 2011). In fact, it observed and promoted the traditional model of gender roles substantially which was also apparent in VO. Nowadays, it is not rare anymore to see fathers holding the newborns or walking the prams. In one case I witnessed, a sole father decided to attend the event with his newborn child by himself because his wife had to stay at home with their older child who was ill. This would not have likely happened during the socialist era where child-caring was not men's domain at all.

Another aspect in which the gendering process clearly manifested was related to the organizers. In the past, much of the preparations of the event were done by women or majority-women organizations, such as the Women's Committee, the Czechoslovak Red Cross, the Committee for Civil Issues, other clerks and last but not least teachers of younger children, all typically women's professions. For instance, in Hostivice in 1989, the Local Committee, which has the main responsibility for organizing the event, had 18 members out of which 16 were women (Kettner, 1989: 140) In the cases I studied in depth, this aspect seems to have remained identical even though the names of the positions have changed. It is typically registrars, clerks from the department for the culture or for social issues, secretaries to the mayor or other clerks sometimes along with teachers or Parents'/Mum's Clubs. All of these are, again, overwhelmingly feminized spheres.

On the other hand, the roles which do not participate as much in the organizational aspects but have an important symbolic value have been typically occupied by men: political representatives who give the main speech and ceremonially give out the presents. During the socialist era, women were seemingly active and respected participants but the traditional power imbalance persisted (e.g. Šiklová, 1999). While there is a tendency for women to be more and more represented in this sphere, particularly on the lower levels, the overall picture is still clear. For instance, there are ca. 18.000 women compared to 44.000 men in the municipal governments (CZSO, 2022c: 7 – 4.). While there are no data on the proportion of women as mayors, it is likely that in the majority of places it will be a man. Overall, the division of roles in the events was and still seems to follow the traditional pattern which is in this way reinforced further.

## 8. Analysis

In the previous three chapters I outlined the results of my study of Vítání občánek in several municipalities, particularly in the Bohemian region. A useful tool in its analysis was the methodological framework of Wendy Griswold thanks to which I could assess and compare various elements of the ceremony and put them into broader socio-cultural context. The framework provides an opportunity to conduct a systematic sociological analysis of a cultural phenomenon which is sensitive to the different perspectives of various relevant actors along with the greater social influences which affect(ed) their thoughts and actions.

In the following sub-chapters I will discuss the fundamental findings of the study in relation to relevant theories. Firstly, I will re-visit Vítání občánek as a rite of passage. It is the core essence of the ceremony as I identified it at the beginning of the analysis and as such plays an important part in the explanation of its persistence and popularity. In return, the study of VO provides an insight into the role of rites of passage in contemporary Czechia in which rituals and religion seemingly matter only very little. The putative irreligiosity will be the focus of the second sub-chapter which will show a possible post-secular standpoint regarding VO and rites of passage in Czechia. The third and fourth sub-chapters will discuss the process of (re-)inventing the ceremony and the role of a “re-inventor” or “institutional entrepreneur”, that is an actor who enables the process to take place smoothly.

### 8.1 Vítání občánek as a Rite of Passage

Already half a century ago it was noted that in a rapidly secularizing society it is rites of passage which still manage to bring a larger number of people to the church (Pickering, 1974). Pickering himself suggested several possible explanations for this, such as the gathering function of the rites. Just like Christmases or birthdays, rites as this one may provide a rare opportunity for a “clan gathering” at a time in history when families and friends often tend to live far away from each other (*ibid.*: 77). This explanation was echoed in the conversations I had with the attendees as well as organisers. In addition to being an opportunity to meet with broader family and neighbours, some parents also appreciated the chance to go somewhere “as a family” for the first time. This coincides with the “aggregating” (postliminal) function of rites of passage (van Gennep, 1981 [1909]).

When new, difficult and/or distressing events, which may be described as “crises”, arise, even otherwise irreligious people often resort to their residual spiritual beliefs as well as basic universal values, symbols and myths theorised Pickering another explanation (1974: 77). This may also be a partial explanation for the popularity of *Vítání občánek* which allows for the enunciation of universally shared and understood values. Many of them were related to the focal point of the ceremony – the newborns.

Studying initiation to adulthood in modern Norway, Pedersen found that despite the popular belief that rites of passage are weakened and diminished, it is possible that in reality they have transformed themselves but their meaning remains significant. In his study, they took on the form of initiations into subcultural fellowships important to the young adults. Their persistence (albeit in a modified form) may be explained by the need for symbolic language during the moments of identification and taking on of a new social role (Pedersen, 1994) That may be why VO is full of symbols related to familial bonds and love, but also to the upbringing of the child. It provides a place for the symbolic language desired by the community which is incorporating new members with new identities – newborns with their parents.

The depth of the crisis corresponds with the modern belief in the influence of upbringing on one’s life quality which places a lot of responsibility on the parents (as discussed in Ch. 2.4). This responsibility was often acknowledged in the speeches including its demanding and stressful character. The mayors typically accentuated the parents’ importance and irreplaceability but at the same time made to sympathize with their fears and difficulties offering support on the part of the municipality. In addition, family and friends were frequently called upon to be aware that they, too, play an important role in the child’s life and upbringing and to assist the parents. An associated (seemingly) universally shared value was that of traditional gender roles, which were interwoven in the ceremony in many ways. It seemed that this gendering came from the part of various actors – political figures, parents, grandparents, teachers and performing children, gift-makers and others. This corresponds with the findings of research which shows the propensity to embrace traditional gender roles with the arrival of children even among those who had up to the time thought and behaved in an opposite way (see Ch. 2.4). Even those who otherwise aim not to uphold these gender norms seemed to accept them for this particular life moment as a way of making sense of the situation.



Pickering also expected greater popularity of baptisms in places where there is a more closely-knit social network and a relatively high authority of the church as well as in places which are overall more religious (1974: 77-78). In the case of Vítání občánků, it is the local municipality instead of church whose authority could be a factor. It is difficult, however, to either refute or confirm this point as there are no statistics available of the percentage of parents who choose to attend. Neither is there a reliable measure of authority and cohesiveness. Nevertheless, it seemed that it may be true to a certain extent. Based on the opinions of the clerks or mayors I talked to, the percentage of families in attendance appears to be higher in the smaller towns and villages. A reason for this may be that it is easier for them to approach and invite the parents, sometimes even in person. The case of Veselí nad Moravou, which is a bigger town (from the point of view of close-knitness), showed another possible explanation. There are generally many more social events taking place there than in the towns and villages in Bohemia. People can thus simply integrate VO into the string of events they are used to attending in their town. The process of ritualisation of the event is thus easier for them than for people in Bohemia who must often employ more rational reasoning when making the choice to go.

Unlike historical rites of passage, Vítání občánků (both in the past and today) does not include many (if any) rituals aimed at influencing or guessing the fate of the child. By contrast, in the past, this was a very common function. A great number of rituals were performed to protect the child from evil spirits, ghosts and other supernatural beings. Seemingly any action or phenomenon could be interpreted as a sign of the child's future, including the fact that somebody performed some ritual incorrectly. Yet other rituals were meant to guarantee good health and luck to the child. Another type of rituals served an informative or acquainting function as the future character and interests of the child were guessed off of various signs. (e.g. Bartoš et al, 1951: 13-16; Čečetka, 1900: 10-12; Motlová, 2016: 120-121; Navrátilová, Verner, 2004: 80; 85) While there are some variations of some of these rituals and symbolisms present in Vítání občánků, they are not taken as seriously and function more as entertainment or as a reference to the past. If a tree planted as a symbol of the child's life dies, it simply gets replaced without any ado.

Navrátilová suggested that these, historically popular and necessary, functions of rituals were substituted by modern rationality and science. For instance, protection of the child (and the mother) is no longer done via symbolic rituals but by employing hygiene and medical

expertise. In some cases, a ritual stays the same but its interpretation changes from symbolic to rational. In other cases, the symbolism is acknowledged however not out of true belief but for social entertainment. (Navrátilová, 1984: 31) For instance, where historically people would carefully choose the type of tree planted or used for the child's benefit (Bartoš et al., 1951: 14; Navrátilová, Verner, 2004: 60; 105), nowadays its symbolism is searched for after it is planted as a way of making the moment more interesting and/or giving the tree some personal meaning *ex-post*. The amount of symbols acknowledged in Vítání občánků is overall also much sparser compared to before. In fact, even those symbolism which are present are often only implied but not openly talked about. There are for instance symbolic pictures on the certificates or presents which the child receives whose meaning is universally shared, but rarely does anybody mention them except for the occasional poem or song. This is for instance the case of "storks" for boys and "crows" for girls, which are birds who in folk beliefs bring the child.

In Vítání občánků, we can also observe the abandonment of certain values and structures which used to be fundamental. A prime example of this are property relations and social status which used to wholly define one's position and role in society, including the experience of rites of passage (Navrátilová, Verner, 2004<sup>44</sup>; Navrátilová, 1984: 30). Vítání občánků is done collectively for children of all backgrounds simply on the basis of their age and permanent residence. The way people of various classes may be differentiated through VO is firstly, through regional inequalities and secondly, by means of which social groups choose to attend or not. The treatment of families during the ceremony as well as their invention itself is however not (at least officially and inherently) determined by social status.

Both in historical ceremonies and in Vítání občánků, an important part of the rite of passage is gift giving. In fact, this is an important part of rites of passage in general which serves as "a bridge to the *liminal* state of the neophytes (Khattri, 2010: 113). Silber calls the connection between gifts and rites of passage as "obvious" and "commonplace" which may be why Van Gennep never openly discusses it. Silber herself demonstrates it to be a rite of passage of its own. (2018) Historically, gift-giving also served the purpose of substantial

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<sup>44</sup> Esp. pages 82-84; 90-91; 99; 133; 135. The main difference was typically between the richer and the poorer. The richer would have greater feasts, more expensive clothes, more symbolic presents, more attendees and could have the ceremonies on Sundays. The poorer had it on workdays and the presents often were of a more practical nature, the choice of godparents also had more practical motives. Differences also gradually arose between cities and the countryside defined by the different social relations and (lack of) homestead ownership.

material support. This function gradually diminished but the ritual remained along with the need to visit the newborn. With the rise of institutionalization of birth, the historically prevalent visits “into the corner” where the new mother and child used to be in seclusion, visits into the hospital became the norm. (Navrátilová, Verner, 2004: 106-114; Navrátilová, 1984: 31)

When I asked parents what they expect from the ceremony or what they like about it, receiving presents was one of the most common answers. It seems unlikely that it would be due to the material value as gifts’ symbolic value surpasses the economic benefits (Wolfenbarger, 1990) albeit expectations regarding their material value do matter (Camerer, 1988; Ruffle, 1999). As such, the municipalities do attempt to provide nice and sometimes even quite costly gifts, such as jewellery. The prevalent meaning and significance however seem to be symbolic. Gift-giving is typically one of the main parts of the ceremony, typically right at the end along with taking photos, and it is done individually with each family called up and ceremoniously congratulated by the mayor while everybody else watches on. Its execution, the attention given to it by the municipalities (including mentioning it in reports from the event in journals, TV coverage or chronicles) and the recollection or expectation of it on the part of the parents would all point to its special significance supporting Silber’s suggestion that it is basically a rite of passage in its own right.

In their study of contemporary baby showers, Fischer and Gainer paid a lot of attention to what gifts were being given to the pregnant women, by whom and how. These aspects varied in different forms of the baby showers reflecting the overall message the attendees wanted to portray. While in a “traditional” baby shower, the gifts were typically equipment for the baby, in a “feminist” baby shower, they were aimed at the woman in her ‘former’ role as an independent, professional adult (Fischer, Gainer, 1993). In *Vítání občánků*, most gifts are either commemorative or an equipment for a baby, such as baby blankets, bibs, plush toys or children’s books. Unlike in the past, there are rarely any magical objects, such as amulets, given. Among the commemorative objects, the most common ones are commemorative coins, jewellery or practical objects with the town’s logo on it, such as cups. In some places, the parents are given money. This seems to be a gesture on the part of the town of appreciation and of support in a financially difficult period, which parenthood typically is. In effect, it serves to affirm the parents in their new situation and reinforce a bond between them and the municipality/the state. The singular importance of the parents’ role in the life

of the child is also only a modern thing. The Church only started to acknowledge it by including them in the child's baptism shortly before VO was established (Navrátilová, 1984: 32). Nowadays, their presence is indispensable.

The traditional values espoused throughout the ceremony do not correspond to the reality of many contemporary families. Historically, non-traditional ways of living were often criminalized or shunned. This did not change radically even during the socialist era. Despite the increase in divorces, single mothers would be subject to much prejudice and gossip, and there are recorded cases of them not being invited to the VO ceremony (Rámišová, 2013). Nowadays, it is no longer the case that non-conforming individuals and families are completely excluded or frowned upon but rather they are often ignored. There were no mentions of single, adoptive or same-sex parents and family models nor did any of the attendees in the ceremonies I witnessed look the part. An exception to the rule seemed to be families of varied ethnicities and disabilities. In Prague 4, for instance, translation into various languages, including sign language, is offered to parents. Parents of various nationalities and/or ethnicities also commonly participate in the event.

## **8.2 Rites of Passage in a Post-Secular Society**

Where by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, public spaces, agencies as well as social sciences were considered very much secular in the Western world, in recent decades a new approach called post-secularism emerged. Post-secularism is part of other transcending processes, such as post-modernism, post-structuralism or post-colonialism. It however does not necessarily signify an end to secularism. Rather, some scholars prefer to think of it as a realization of how diverse and variable forms the secular can take on and as questioning the existing manifestations and impacts of secularism on our society. (Furani, 2015; McLennan, 2007) Others focus more on individualization and heterogenization of religion which, in this non-traditional post-secular form, is also gaining popularity and power (Havlíček, Klingorová, 2023).

The specificity of the Czech context lies in its low levels of religious adherence exceeding by far other post-communist countries. Yet Havlíček and Klingorová (2023) have found that young Czech adults (who have therefore lived their lives in a free secular country) show signs of the persistence of religiosity and spirituality typical for post-secularism. Their beliefs are subjective, individualized and abstract. They come from various sources,

including Eastern spiritualities, Christianity and paganism and together compile a unique and individualised ‘religious hodgepodge’, as the authors call it. They also found there to be regional differences especially at the level of inventiveness and sources of influence which they described in three typified forms: heterogeneous Prague, highly religious South Moravia (Kyjov district) and highly secularized Sudetenland (Teplice district).

In my study, municipalities in similar regions were also included, although from South Moravia I studied Veselí nad Moravou (Hodonín district). Apart from Prague, I also included towns in its close vicinity. I did not include a municipality directly in the former Sudetenland, but several which are in its borderlands – Holovousy (Jičín district), Kralupy nad Vltavou (Mělník district) and Rakovník (Rakovník district) and whose level of religiosity is also very low, in the case of Rakovník even lower than Teplice<sup>45</sup>. In Havlíček and Klingorová’s study, the respondents – young adults – were of 25-35 years of age. Parents attending VO with their newborns can be expected to be in a similar, albeit broader range (approx. 18-45 years) and so for the most part of the generations that grew up in a democratic country, which was the main criterion of the authors.

Havlíček and Klingorová also found that young people interact with transcendence in specific, carefully chosen spaces which have certain qualities, such as calmness, loneliness, nature character or presence of “energies”. They could be churches or other traditionally sacred places but only when they are empty and calm. (2023: 240) In two cases I studied, Vítání občanů takes place in church – Holovousy (near Sudetenland) and Hovorčovice (near Prague). Both municipalities are very irreligious, not only in statistics but also real practice: there is only a small community of believers and church service only takes place a few times a year on special occasions.

In the case of Hovorčovice, I found that people are awed and affected by the church’s atmosphere which the municipal council likes to endorse even further by asking a professional soprano singer to sing and play the organ during the ceremony. The mayor also makes sure to acknowledge the relevance and importance of the Church to Vítání občanů.

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<sup>45</sup> Level of religiosity in Rakovník (10.14 % in the district, 11.07 % in the town proper) is even lower than that in Teplice (11.33 %). For Kralupy nad Vltavou (Mělník) and Holovousy (Jičín), it is between 13-15 %. In the selected Prague districts it is approx. 22 % and in the towns in its vicinity (Hostivice, Hovorčovice), it is between 16,5-20 %. In Veselí nad Moravou (Hodonín), it is around 40 %. Source: CZSO, 2021b (Percentages calculated by KŠ)

On the other hand, in Holovousy, the church has practically lost this “magic” although people appreciate it and are proud of it as a cultural shrine and symbol of the village. The atmosphere there is ‘desecrated’ further by its modernization and adaptation to the function of a community centre; there are modern, moveable chairs and on the walls, there are boards with pictures and other creations made by children. A difference also is that in the case of Holovousy, the church has become their property almost 20 years ago whereas in Hovorčovice it is the Church’s estate. In the case of Veselí nad Moravou, a very religious place, the idea of using church for Vítání občanů seemed unthinkable. People have accepted the separation of the ceremonies of VO and baptism in multiple ways including their religious or spiritual meaning, the community they celebrate it with, their time and their location. “*You have baptism at the church with your family and then you come here and celebrate Vítání občanů with your neighbours,*”<sup>46</sup> a respondent explained. This was the attitude of all people from all municipalities who had their child baptised as well as welcomed who I talked to.

While the majority of VO celebrations take place at a non-religious place, such as the townhall, these few cases accentuate a possible ‘re-enchanting’ tendency as outlined by Testa (2023a). He identified seven forms which ‘re-enchantment’ takes on in contemporary societies, one of which is that of “new forms of civic rituality, social memory, and/or the fruition of cultural heritage” (ibid.: 127). These also include humanist birth, death and marriage ceremonies which have recently arisen in many Western (Robertson, 2017; Wojtkowiak, 2020) but also non-Western (Rejowska, 2020) societies. Unlike Vítání občanů, these are however more closely designed after their religious counterpart and overall still very niche. VO benefits from its previous forceful institutionalization and popularization by the Communist regime but also the freedom it is given today. Unlike humanist ceremonies, VO is not sought out specifically by people dissatisfied with the religious rite nor does it struggle to provide rituals supporting the sense of continuity and community. In today’s democratic, post-secular environment, people are given the opportunity to project their beliefs, including those of (pseudo)religious character. These personal attitudes and interpretations are accentuated in those cases where VO is moved to

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<sup>46</sup> „Máte křest v kostele s rodinou a pak jdete sem oslavit Vítání občanů se sousedy.“

the church prodding the link between the ritual and the immaterial (religious, supernatural etc.).

### 8.3 The Process of (Re)Invention

In both invention and re-invention of *Vítání občánek* I found there are three functional categories of elements which each serves its specific purpose during the (re)inventing process but also in the acceptance of the product by society. I refer to them as “target values”, “direct continuity” and “general continuity”. These categories emerged in both the invention of VO during communism and the re-invention after 1989 although the specific ideas and meanings varied which is indicated in Tab. 3. It must be emphasized, however, that it is a simplified and generalized overview. As all social processes, (re)invention is complex and multi-layered and so this is not by far an exhaustive list. In addition, the classification into categories is also not absolute as the specific elements are often employed in various ways and besides frequently intersect with others.

	<b>Invention of VO</b>	<b>Re-invention of VO</b>
<b>Target Values</b>	communism, modern age	democracy, capitalism, local community
<b>Direct Continuity</b>	Christianity (baptism), folk traditions	communism (VO), folk traditions
<b>General Continuity</b>	universal/cultural traditions and values	universal/cultural traditions and values

*Table 3: Schema of (re)invention of *Vítání občánek*, author: KŠ*

The category of ‘target values’ are in a way the objective of the (re)invention as Hobsbawm (2012) described it. They are the new values, norms and beliefs which have arisen (or the (re)inventing actor desires them to). They themselves however do not instigate a sense of tradition due to their novelty. Moreover, they may not be accepted at all by the contemporary society for this reason or due to political circumstances. In the invention of VO, the target values are based on the Communist ideology, such as the invocation of camaraderie, equality, national identity, socialism and scientific progress, all tainted with its totalitarian nature. The re-invention reflects the contemporary context of political and cultural re-

orientation of the Czech Republic to the West, globalization, democracy and capitalism along with the values of freedom, individualism and environmentalism. It also incorporates the rapid technological advancement, chiefly in the sphere of social media. For the main re-inventors, the municipalities, the fundamental target value (which is however intertwined with the aforementioned ones) is that of local community.

Hobsbawm suggested that invented traditions seek to inculcate them firstly by repetition and secondly by establishing a sense of continuity (ibid.: 1). It seemed to me, studying the case of the (re)invention of VO, that there are two ways in which this is achieved.

Firstly, there is that of ‘direct continuity’. Symbols are directly taken from the past and inserted into the new tradition seemingly unchanged. Interpretation of them, however, changes completely in line with either ‘target values’ or ‘general continuity’. They are able to elicit a sense of continuity as people connect the familiar aspects with their past usage. In this way the traditionalization of the ceremony is facilitated as a sense of continuity with the past is an elemental and universal quality of traditions (Testa, 2020: 30).

This corresponds to the concept of empty (or sliding) signifiers used by DeWaal when discussing the re-invention of modern Carnival in Cologne. Traditional forms and symbols were being used as sliding signifiers by political leaders who “projected radically new meanings that reflected modern local identity and modern mentalities” onto them (DeWaal, 2013: 13). At the same time, however, DeWaal notes that for many citizens the signifiers remained empty as they lacked memory of older meanings (ibid.: 20) In the case of the invention of Vítání občánků, the process of projecting new meanings onto the symbols was more successful due to how explicit and universal it was. The propaganda of the totalitarian state was so straightforward and omnipresent that organisers and participants everywhere would easily (and practically mindlessly) apply it to the symbols. This was manifest, for instance, in the case of folklore. The Communist interpretation of it was enforced so much so that it became practically inseparable from it.

On the other hand, when asking about the meaning of the constituents now, few respondents (organisers as well as attendees) were able to give me any explanation. Typically, they would settle for “it looks nice” or “it has always been done like this” or, in case of organisers, “parents like it”. That is not to say that no meanings are applied to them at all. As discussed in the other two categories – “target values” and “general continuity” – the opposite is true.



What I mean is that there is no or very little need for a coherent, explicit story for the sense of continuity to be satisfied. A vague association with the past seems enough to foster it. At the same time, however, this association is very important and as a result, speeches at the ceremony or invitations to the ceremony very often include mentions of how it is “a tradition of our ancestors” and the like. This has been described by Catherine Bell who criticized the presupposition of a shared meaning communicated by a ritual which can be found in the theories of Durkheim, Gluckman or Turner. She showed that there is often a great diversity of interpretations and beliefs among the participants and, moreover, those interpretations may be ambiguous, vague, inconsistent and unstable. Yet none of this prevents the ritual from successfully promoting social solidarity in most cases. (Bell, 1992: 169-182) It is not the original/true meaning nor necessarily one shared interpretation that matters as much as the sense of connection to the past which the ritualized practices and objects evoke. The past may be “mythified” through the reference to more or less accurate or vague “origins”, which is a symbolic mechanism that fosters the “collective sentiments of belonging, community, and identity” (Testa, 2020: 30-32).

Most of the signifiers in the original *Vítání občánek* came from baptism and folk traditions. Its aim to replace (and as such succeed) baptism was explicitly communicated and equally explicit were the elements inspired by it. The reason was not a lack of imagination but an attempt to allow people to go through the motions of the ceremony as they were used to but in an authorized environment.

The re-invented *Vítání občánek* in turn drew on the signifiers from the original *Vítání občánek* thanks to which it managed to create a sense of uninterrupted continuity. Parents believe they are taking their child to the same ceremony which they attended themselves 40 years ago because it has the same name, it is held at the same place, there is the same cradle and so on. At the same time, everybody interprets the symbols in the contemporary context and, when directly asked, is aware of this shift. Some even consider it to be a completely different event, simply because of the changed meaning. The meaning typically stems from the ‘target values’ but sometimes also from ‘general continuity’. Apart from the signifiers adopted from the original *Vítání občánek* (and as such sometimes originating in baptism), there are attempts made to include elements from historical folk traditions. These are also then re-interpreted to fit the contemporary context. It seemed to me that these are the symbols which are most prone to having mythopoetic quality. Their association with the distant (and

as such mysterious) past, the enterprising and creative spirit of the actor who initiates its incorporation as well as the democratic setting all seem to make for a favourable combination which inspires the production of stories and fictitious explanations.

Finally, a successful (re)invention is accomplished by the means of ‘general continuity’. These are universally shared norms and values of the whole society which have endured even the great societal shifts. They create a sense of familiarity due to their simply being the same as before. Moreover, they function as common ground between various actors with different experiences and interests. As such, they are the language through which the interpretation (rooted in ‘target values’) of the reproduced signs (of ‘direct continuity’) is enabled. They include the universally held beliefs regarding the importance and experiences of family and parenthood, gender, love, humanity, solidarity, interpersonal relations, kindness and decency. The ideas may not be fully shared by everybody, especially as regards for instance who constitutes a family or gender roles, but everybody has been socialized into them and they are universally understood. Other values reflect the historical and national (and local) identity of the Czech people. In this respect, there is some overlap with ‘target values’ which seek to eventually become part of the ‘general continuity’.

#### **8.4 Agency, or Institutional Entrepreneurship**

A crucial role in the process of (re)invention is played by a specific type of agent, an “institutional entrepreneur”. Their role is to actively, deliberately and purposefully (initiate and) guide the ceremony through the transformation. Identifying the agent can also help us comprehend how invention differed from re-invention in the particular case of Vítání občanů.

In the original invention of VO, we observe a typical top-down process. The key agent was located in the highest positions within the Communist Party (which then totally controlled the governance and administration of the country). The local organisers were an interchangeable component rather than an independent agent although their level of eagerness was likely to vary across the country. Both the choice of included elements and their interpretation were however unified and controlled by the Party through their complex and efficient hierarchical structure. It served as a motivation for those at lower levels to act in accordance with the ideas of their superiors as their appraisal was a key to good life opportunities. In addition to that, it functioned as a network of both secret and open, official

and unofficial supervision which allowed the high-ranking Communist functionaries to enforce their rules and ideas across the whole country including small and remote districts.

By contrast, it is more difficult to describe its re-invention by the top-down/bottom-up logic. Seemingly, it would correspond to the top-down process albeit at the local and not any more the national level. The main re-inventor is a representative of the local administration whose authority and resources back up the transformation and popularization. At the same time, however, the impetus for and/or endorsement of this process often comes from the public who exert pressure on the administration to act in this way.

Naturally, the political aspects of decision-making with regards to the re-invention of VO cannot be ignored, even in the smallest, least politicized municipalities. This is particularly apparent when financial resources are considered. Expenses on the presents, decorations, photographs and other elements are a matter of political discussions and the government assumes responsibility for their being spent well. Similarly, the condition of having one's permanent residence officially in the municipality is universally required of attendees due to the event being financed from the local budget but also as a political means to motivate people to move their address and thus pay the fees there. Another, and equally important, political aspect is the democratic system in which political figures face elections every few years. Their decisions are influenced by this in that they seek to be in the potential voters' favour. This extends even to the clerks who are not elected but who answer for their actions to their superiors, the local government.

DiMaggio points out that states (or in this case municipalities) "are abstractions that, in practice, consist of multiple actors with multiple preferences. In the case of any particular institutional change, states can be considered coalitions of actors, some of whom support change, some of whom oppose it, and some of whom are indifferent and willing to cast their lot with actors who will side with them on issues they consider more important." (2017: 81) He also suggests that there is more complexity to the interaction between the state and the public (the society) in the process of bringing about institutional change. A point to be considered is that state actors are not necessarily separate from civil-society actors. Officeholders also have personal experiences and interests outside their job which may permeate their work decisions. (ibid.: 83-86) There was diversity in this aspect regarding these aspects in the municipalities I studied, mainly due to their size.

Generally speaking, the smaller the municipality, the less separated were the professional and personal identities of the re-inventors. In the smallest municipalities, the two often merge almost completely. While aware of their status as (vice)mayors, their identity as residents of the town or village, neighbours and (grand)parents is very significant in how they go about their job. In our conversations, they often explained different elements (particularly when describing emotions and atmosphere) by relating personal stories of how they welcomed their own grandchildren or how their children were welcomed. Communication with both colleagues and voters is often done through unofficial means, such as meeting a neighbour in the streets. On the other “pole” are the politicians of the biggest towns and cities who do not and cannot know all their voters personally. Their job is strictly a political career which means that they lean into their professional identity more even during VO including cases where they do know some participants personally. The clerks in charge of organization tend to let their personal identity manifest to some extent but at the same time their hands are tied by having to answer to their political superiors in a robust bureaucratic system.

There is much discussion as regards the factors which enable the activity of an institutional entrepreneur. Production of new institutional rules and resources is likely to emerge when new problems arise (Phillips et al., 2000). In the case of VO, external impulses, ‘crises’, often created a situation in which the main actors were incited to react and re-invent. An example of these were the introduction of new laws, complaints by parents, maltreatment of greenery in the town, acquisition of new estates or technological development.

Another aspect of institutional entrepreneurship is the actor him- or herself. Actors’ social skill (Fligstein, 2001), systemic power (Lawrence et al., 2005) and reflexivity (Mutch, 2007) are among the identified factors which lead to one’s becoming an institutional entrepreneur. In the case of VO, the institutional entrepreneur seems to always work at the local council at a position where he or she oversees the organization of social events. The name of the job as well as the overall content differs, but there are some shared aspects. It requires a certain level of power or responsibility within the council and is typically a long-term position. While in smaller municipalities it is often a political representative or their close colleague or subordinate, it is not a politically-oriented person or function. Instead, it seems to often be a person who enjoys organizing various types of social events where people can meet and celebrate. Many of the “institutional entrepreneurs” I interviewed were very enthusiastic about the organizational and creative aspects of their job, sometimes coming up with

possible future plans or innovations even during the interviews. This seems to support the idea that institutional entrepreneurs have a certain psychological profile in common, which includes for instance excellent social skills, that is “the ability to induce cooperation among others” (Fligstein, 2001: 112). They can use the pre-existing rules and resources within the current organizational order to transform and reproduce local orders, for instance by skilfully reorganizing and reconceptualizing disparate actors’ identities (ibid.: 115). Lawrence et al. argue that not only establishing but also perception, imagination and inspiration of new ideas is rooted in the systemic forms of power, particularly influence (2005: 184) They use the power and resources enabled by the local council, including the contact with various actors within the bureaucracy. The more complex the bureaucracy (which comes with bigger municipalities), the more difficult for the main organiser to fulfil their potential as an institutional entrepreneur.

The agency of true institutional entrepreneurs is primarily strategic and future-oriented (Dorado, 2005). In the cases of organisers of VO who did not fulfil this role, past or present-oriented agency which predominantly consists of routine or sensemaking behaviours could be observed. They carried on organizing the event because of the high interest of the public and their superiors but they did not truly engage in imaginatively, actively transforming it. On the contrary, institutional entrepreneurs take the past and the present as an inspiration for the future as well as a source of pride, but their motivation is to continue and improve the tradition. They re-evaluate it, ponder over alternative options and adopt new strategies.

Testa notes that (both professional and non-professional) experts may play a special role as mediators when interpretations of the symbols of a reinventing tradition are established. The tradition itself may be considered an arena where different interests and needs are negotiated. (2017: 123) During my conversations with various participants of Vítání občanů, I often experienced this myself. When I asked about the meaning or origins of certain elements of the ceremony performed there, a common response went along the lines of “We don’t know but we would like to. Will you let us know if you find out in your thesis?” Another, equally common, response was to immediately think of “the person who knows everything about these things”, typically a former registrar or clerk who used to organize the event some time ago or a person known for their interest in local history and traditions, such as a chronicler. There is a clear recognized level of authority of these people as bearers of the canonized interpretation and as mediators between the academic and vernacular discourse (Testa, 2020:

31). Immediately “using” me as a new resource of possible knowledge and change regarding the event was a typical characteristic of institutional entrepreneurs. They take interest in new information and resources beyond the basic expectations of their job. In addition, they form a network of these resources and are able to strategically co-ordinate them to achieve their objectives.

## 9. Conclusion

In this thesis I have attempted to shine some light on the inconspicuous ceremony of Vítání občánků. At first sight, it may seem like an uninteresting event, but in reality, it allows a unique insight into the role of rites of passage in a contemporary, (post)secular and post-Communist society and into the factors necessary for a successful (re)invention of a tradition.

Despite the decline in religiosity and traditional rituality, rites of passage have retained an important status even up to today. A reason for this is their function of letting individuals and communities safely navigate unprecedented life situations – even crises – by providing an opportunity to collectively live out the transformation and the language to clearly describe the former and new realities. It also allows individuals to put their whole existence into a temporal perspective. Vítání občánků provides this experience not only to the parents and their newborn but also the broader community, including grandparents and other relatives, friends and neighbours. Unlike the vast majority of rites of passage aimed at initiating newborns into society, such as baptisms, it is a fully secular – or in some cases post-secular – event that is however still done collectively within a suprafamilial community.

There are many circumstances that have led to its successful (re)invention and persistence. In the original Hobsbawm's conception, an "invented tradition" is chiefly a radical societal transformation and the intention of the new elites to enforce their values and norms by invoking a sense of continuity with the past. The invention of Vítání občánků came with the seize of power by Communists who used folklore and social events as political tools in an openly intentional way. In fact, they created an elaborate network of events, tasks and actors which were strictly co-ordinated and altogether allowed the Party to have almost full control over the whole society. Vítání občánků was meant to replace baptism and so in many ways it mimicked the Catholic ceremony or ancient folk birth rites in order to give people something familiar to hold onto. These elements which induced a sense of familiarity and continuity were however filled with Communist symbol(ism)s. To bridge the gap between the two, universally accepted values and symbols, such as the love for one's child or gendered expectations, were used.

Although invented already at the beginning of the Communist era, Vítání občánků was not practiced much until Normalization in the 1970s when the elites tried to use all possible tools

to re-gain and keep their nearly lost power. From then on, it was treated as a commonplace ceremony which people generally attended. After the 1989 change of regimes, many words, events, rituals and symbols associated with Communism were abandoned. *Vítání občanů* also experienced a decline but eventually managed to re-invent itself successfully and persist. It is now practiced in many municipalities in Czechia, Slovakia and even at the Czech embassy in Brussels. A key-role in the re-inventing process is an “institutional entrepreneur”, an actor who has the right social skills, interest and access to resources and power. In this case it is typically a clerk at the townhall or cityhall or a mayor, depending on the size of the municipality and its organization. An important factor in the endurance of the ceremony has also been the high interest of attendees, specifically parents but also grandparents which seems to stem from their need for a rite of passage.

The mechanism of re-invention of *Vítání občanů* differs slightly compared to the case of the re-invented tradition of physicians-tabibs in Uzbekistan, another post-Communist country, as described by Hohmann (2010). Both share the important role of public interest which provides an impetus for the institutional actor to act (in the case of VO, however, it is not always an impetus but rather a coaction). In the Uzbek case, the government reacts to what it deems unwanted behaviour (trusting tabibs more than physicians) by (re)inventing an option that resembles what the people trust but achieves what the government needs. This, what Hohmann calls a hybridized tradition, satisfies all parties and catches on. *Vítání občanů* is not government-(re)invented but rather undergoes the process at the municipal level. It cannot be described as a simple top-down process because the local politicians or clerks often do not divorce themselves from their civil life, particularly in smaller towns and villages. It is thus hard to determine whether their interest in cultivating the tradition is more political or “personal”. In addition, there are other factors which may affect their action, such as bureaucratic processes, pressure exerted by the interested public or an authority figure or disinterest in changing things that have been established before.

As there is not a one simple goal, as in the case of Uzbekistan, the re-invention of VO has also allowed for more creativity and so we can see a variety of new elements in the ceremony. Many however find inspiration in neighbouring towns or on the internet and so there is a lot of resemblance between the ceremonies across the country. They are also similarly influenced by the contemporary culture, such as new technologies or questions of



environmentalism. In addition, many elements have persisted from Communism as a way of creating the sense of continuity which is explicitly sought out by many attendees.

Vítání občánek also allowed a glimpse of the post-secularization of the Czech society as in some municipalities, it is moved “back” into the church. Originally, the ceremony was intended to drive people out of churches so the decision to hold it there now is very unexpected. It shows how people can deliberately hold an almost paradoxical opinion as they can see Vítání občánek at the same time as a continuation from the Communist era and at the same time as a completely separate event. The continuation serves to make it feel like a real tradition which stems from history while the separation serves to disassociate it from the meanings and symbols it used to have but does not anymore. This acceptance of Vítání občánek despite its troubled history is universal and so we can see it being celebrated even in the most religious regions of the country. There it functions rather as an additional event to baptism with a different meaning whereas for less religious places it is simply “the” rite of passage for newborns. Holding Vítání občánek in a church is however only likely in the least religious regions of the country, particularly the Sudetenland and central Bohemia. The most atheist (or apatheist as Testa, 2023a puts it) places may disassociate from the religious undertones altogether using the church simply as a historical monument, a cultural shrine and a community centre. On the other hand, less atheist places may attempt to combine the religious and the secular in a more open way.

These new post-secular activities, which were recently studied with similar result by Havlíček and Klingorová (2023), are worth researching further. Attitudes towards churches as locations of non-religious (or specifically non-Catholic) rituals may be a convenient subject for such a study. It explores the encounter of traditional religion(s), of the historical and contemporary communities connected with the place but also of the individuals with their personal stories, values and beliefs. These cases may be helpful in guiding the difficult conversations on the topic of highly abstract and individualized relationships with the supernatural even in a country, such as the Czech Republic, where people are not used to discussing their religious views. It must be stressed again that despite the (ap)theist tendencies shown in many surveys, there are many ways in which Czechs show signs of being “re-enchanted” (Testa, 2023a), including the interest in spirituality and symbolism (both also often demonstrate in the VO ceremonies, such as when parents are choosing the

“right” tree for their child), re-appropriation of “vernacular” elements (such as the inclusion of *sudičky*) or budding of social memory (such as the re-building of local identities).

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# Diploma Thesis Proposal

## “Vítání občánků”: Social Analysis of a Czech Baby-Welcoming Ceremony

Student: Kristina Švábová

Studijní program/Study Programme: Sociologie (Sociologie, veřejnost a politika)

Title in English: “Vítání občánků”: Social Analysis of a Czech Baby-Welcoming Ceremony

Název v češtině: Sociologická analýza Vítání občánků

Key words: Czech society, secularization, communist traditions, transition to democracy, transition ritual, baby-welcoming ceremony

Klíčová slova: česká společnost, sekularizace, komunistické tradice, přechod k demokracii, přechodový rituál, Vítání občánků

Supervisor: Alessandro Testa, Ph.D.

Kód semináře/Class Code: MGRA

### Statement of the problem

In my diploma thesis, I would like to explore a Czech baby-welcoming ceremony called “Vítání občánků”. Czechs are known for their atheistic and irreligious attitudes (ČSÚ, 2022: Tab. 10.1; Froese, 2005; Johnson, Zurlo, Crossing, 2016) which lead to lower adherence to religious traditions, yet this ceremony continues to be observed across the whole country. Despite its continued popularity, it has been mostly overlooked by social scientists. Due to its association with greater societal trends and influences, such as state ideology, secularization and neo-liberalism, I believe it can serve as a valuable reflection of the Czech society. A particular focus shall be put on mothers with the intention of seeing what role the ceremony plays in their transition to motherhood since they are typically the ones most affected by the arrival of a newborn.

### Aims and Research Questions

The aim of my thesis is to explore how “Vítání občánků” is performed and perceived nowadays and subsequently explain why. My research will be guided by the following research questions:

- What is “Vítání občánků”, when and why was it established?
- What transformations has “Vítání občánků” undergone during the transition to democracy?

- How is “Vítání občánků” performed nowadays and are there any local differences?
- How and why do municipalities organize the event nowadays?
- In which aspects does it retain its communist legacy?
- Which trends have shaped the way “Vítání občánků” is performed and perceived nowadays?
- What role does “Vítání občánků” play in the parents’ transition to parenthood?
  - Why do parents attend the ceremony?
  - How do the parents experience the ceremony?

Nevertheless, the qualitative design of the research will allow me to flexibly react to newly-gained information and as a result, in the course of research I may diverge from the research questions as they stand now.

### **State of the Art and Theoretical Framework**

“Vítání občánků” was popularized during Communism in an attempt to replace baptism. The effort to eradicate the influence of religion and the Catholic Church in particular was an intrinsic part of the regime (Minarik, 2022: 220; Václavík, 2007: 480) and can be traced across all the Soviet Union and its satellites (e.g. Paukštyté-Šaknienė, 2007; Petkūnas, 2013, Powell, 1967). In many ways, the ceremony reflects the Communist ideals. Unlike other baby-welcoming ceremonies, it is organized by municipalities and gathers several unrelated babies who are symbolically referred to as “little citizens”. Its aim is thus to reinforce the meaning and cohesiveness of community.

However, it is not just a relic of the Communist past. For one, much of its symbolism is universal, especially when it comes to easing the transition to parenthood and welcoming a new person into a community. It may be found in other baby-welcoming rituals, such as gender-reveal parties or name-giving ceremonies, as well. Furthermore, “Vítání občánků” is likely to have undergone changes as part of the process commonly referred to as “transition” from communism to democracy during which the Czech Republic has been trying to embrace the “Western modern project” (Blokker, 2005: 504). This is because culture is not fixed, rather, it constantly evolves together with society. Hence it is susceptible to the environment, development and advancement of the society, including the rise and fall of religion, or technology (Rasak, 2010: 10-11). We may even come across examples of accumulated culture which is the result of newly invented, discovered or borrowed elements being added to the present culture, and which is part of the process of cultural growth (ibid.: 7). An example of this would be the addition of a tree-planting ritual which had not been a part of “Vítání občánků” until very recently.

Moreover, while traditional birth rituals have been decreasing due to modernization and secularization, attempts to re-discover old rituals and perform them in a way that reflects contemporary values have been made. That is the case of secular and humanist naming ceremonies in Norway, United Kingdom and elsewhere, or “Mother’s Blessing”, an

American ceremony inspired by a Native American Navajo tradition (Wojtowiak, 2020). Likewise, marriages, funerals and other traditions have been undergoing a similar process even in very religious countries, such as Poland (Rejowska, 2020). “Vítání občánků” is presumably one of the most established fully-secularized, functional and meaningful baby-related ceremony and may thus serve as an example of such a ceremony in contemporary society.

In addition, “Vítání občánků” may also fulfill the function of a ritual of transition. Birth is a fundamental life passage which affects the whole community and causes feelings of existentialist and spiritual ambiguity and uncertainty (Wojtowiak, 2020). The significance of its consequences for Czech mothers is further enhanced by the legal and cultural conditions in the Czech Republic, such as an unusually long parental leave or the lack of options of flexible employment and institutional childcare for young children. I am using a gendered term ‘mothers’ since it is still mostly them who stay at home with the child and thus are affected by its arrival the most. For instance, in 2020, 98 % of parental allowance recipients were women (MPSV, 2021).

The value of primary care was embraced by the Czechs during the transition to democracy as a reaction to the communist suppression of maternity. At the same time, neo-liberal values of self-enhancement, self-fulfilment and individualism were also embraced which was immediately manifested by a sharp decline in fertility and natality, increase in the age of first-time mothers and the number of children born out of marriage (Eurydice, 2022). These neo-liberal values had led to the formation of a new way of parenting called “intensive mothering” or “intensive parenting”, according to which a good upbringing of a child requires intensive care and incessant accessibility from the parent (Wall, 2004). This concept includes the ideas that children must be cognitively stimulated by parents and that their needs must be prioritized, that parenting is difficult, yet fulfilling and that it is the domain of women (Liss et al., 2013). In addition to the intensive care for the child, parents are faced with contradictory expectations of fulfilling one’s own individual needs in other spheres of their lives which is difficult to achieve and leads to increased stress and feelings of guilt and inadequacy (Guendouzi, 2006). This trend originated in the Western world a long time ago but has already been observed in the Czech Republic, as well, with intensive mothering being practiced more by mothers who live in bigger cities and have higher degrees (Nešporová, 2019; Pavlicová, 2016).

The transition from a self-centred identity defined by self-actualization in the fields of education, work or personal interests to the identity of a full-time mother is difficult and may cause mothers to experience “fractured identities” due to the need to redefine their sense of the self by incorporating the child into it (Laney et al., 2015). It has been observed that while the pre-family behaviour as well as the plans and ideals of Czech post-communist generations are notably shaped by the Western values, when it comes to the reality of parenthood, they continue to fall back into the model of conventional gender roles as mothers-caregivers and fathers-breadwinners (Křížková, 2002; Nešporová, 2019). One function of rituals is to control behaviour by defining and assigning social roles while

demanding and encouraging both the assignees and others to respect these roles (Miller, 2005: 1187). “Vítání občánků” may thus ease the sharp and difficult transition to parenthood.

### **Methodology and Ethical Considerations**

Due to the nature of the aims, the data and methods will be qualitative. I would like to attend the ceremony and through non-participant observation gain insight into how it is performed. In order to acquire more information on how it has evolved I would also like to interview relevant clerks and search in available documents, such as local journals, chronicles and websites. By in-depth interviews with parents, I would like to find out how they perceive the ceremony.

To ensure that the data are gained and used ethically and that all interviewees are fully informed, I will be employing various measures, such as informed consent, anonymization of personal information, authorization and possibly also other means. To analyse the data, I will use Griswold’s methodological framework which was designed in the realm of sociology of culture and whose advantages include its sensitivity to social meanings and interactions (Griswold, 1987).

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## **List of Appendices**

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## **Appendix no. 1: Informed consent**

### **Informovaný souhlas s rozhovorem**

Byl/a jste požádána o rozhovor v rámci sběru dat pro diplomovou práci Kristiny Švábové, studentky oboru Sociologie na Fakultě sociálních věd Univerzity Karlovy. Tématem práce je obřad Vítání občánků a přechod k rodičovství v současné české společnosti.

S Vaším svolením bude tento rozhovor nahráván. Nahraný rozhovor bude přepsán a použit pro analýzu. Ani zvuková ani textová forma rozhovoru nebude žádným způsobem jako celek zveřejněna. Vaše účast na rozhovoru je dobrovolná a můžete ji kdykoli v jeho průběhu přerušit.

Prosím o Váš souhlas s provedením rozhovoru za výše uvedených podmínek.

Podpis: .....

Dne: .....

## Appendix no. 2: Example of analysis using Griswold's framework

Analysis of "pamětní kniha" (commemorative book) before 1989

Charge	Brief	Mentality of soc. categories	Matrix of local sensibility	Social and cultural experience prox.	Social and cultural experience remote
náhrada podpisu při křtu	náhrada křtu	KSČ	vytlačení křesťanství		komunismus
		KSČ	náhrada křesťanství		křesťanství
	výplň obřadu	KSČ	vytlačení křesťanství		komunismus
oslava narození dítěte	zhmotnění přechod. rit.	širší komunita	získání nových identit	přechod. rit.	
důkaz o přítomnosti rodičů	kontrola	KSČ	moc, kontrola nad spol.		komunismus
	důkaz o zájmu rodičů	KSČ	propaganda		komunismus
	povinná účast, „upsání se“	KSČ	moc, kontrola nad spol.		komunismus
	výkaz o činnosti	nižší členové KSČ	zodpovídání se výš - struktura KSČ		komunismus

Analysis of “pamětní kniha” (commemorative book) after 1989

<b>Charge</b>	<b>Brief</b>	<b>Mentality of soc. categories</b>	<b>Matrix of local sensibility</b>	<b>Social and cultural experience prox.</b>	<b>Social and cultural experience remote</b>
návaznost na VO a křest	kontinuita (před-po 1989)	všichni	znalost VO před 1989		komunismus
oslava narození dítěte	zhmotnění přechod. rit.	všichni, zejm. rodiče	získání nových identit	přechod. rit.	
oficialita	zhmotnění přechod. rit.	všichni, zejm. rodiče	získání nových identit	přechod. rit.	
	vztah občan-obec (radnice)	úřad	zodpovídá se občanům		demokracie
		občané	komunita, sounáležitost		komunita, lokální identita

### Appendix no. 3: List of analysed elements of VO

Before 1989	After 1989
samotné Vítání občáňků	samotné Vítání občáňků
obřadní místo/radnice	obřadní místo/radnice
přípravna	
	kostel
název “občánci”	název “občánci”
věk dítěte	věk dítěte
účast širší rodiny a komunity	účast širší rodiny a komunity
rozesazení	rozesazení
počty dětí, turnusy	počty dětí, turnusy
organizátoři (MNV, SPOZ)	organizátoři (úřad, úředníci)
starosta, odznak starosty	starosta, odznak starosty
další společenské organizace	
pozvánka, blahopřání	pozvánka, blahopřání
proslov	proslov
představení dětí	představení dětí
blahopřání a dary (obecně)	blahopřání a dary (obecně)
dar: hračka	dar: hračka
dar: květina	dar: květina
dar: pamětní list, certifikát	dar: pamětní list, certifikát
dar: kniha o obci	dar: kniha o obci
dar: upomínkové předměty	dar: upomínkové předměty
dar: praktické předměty	dar: praktické předměty
dar: dary od patronů	dar: sponzorské dary
	dar: šperk, pamětní peníz apod.
	dar: hotovost
barvy	barvy
slíb rodičů	
pamětní kniha	pamětní kniha
vystoupení (obecně)	vystoupení (obecně)

vystoupení: profesionální	vystoupení: profesionální
vystoupení: děti	vystoupení: děti
vystoupení: říkanky, lid. písničky ap.	vystoupení: říkanky, lid. písničky ap.
fotografování	fotografie/video
kolébka	kolébka
sázení stromů	sázení stromů
	nové rituály: sudičky
	nové rituály: přípitek