

# A EUROPEAN PHILOSOPHER OF A DIFFERENT LANGUAGE

Klaus Nellen | Editorial



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Edmund Husserl, world famous philosopher and founder of phenomenology, was born in the Moravian town of Prostějov (then Proßnitz) on 8 April 1859. Sigmund Freud and Gustav Mahler are other contemporary protagonists of modernity coming from the Moravian region, a fact that, as in Husserl's case, is hardly remembered.

Husserl's family, as well as that of his wife Malvine, born Steinschneider, belonged to the town's large Jewish community. Not many traces are left today of the rich Jewish life in Prostějov. During Nazi occupation (1939 – 1945), the Jewish cemetery was expropriated and demolished in 1939, and almost all Jewish citizens were deported to Terezín in 1942. In 1945 Prostějov's German population was expelled. Finally, most of the old ghetto fell prey to modernization measures in the 1970s. The house where Husserl was born disappeared.

Husserl went to the *Gymnasium* in Olomouc and then studied in Leipzig, Berlin and Vienna. He started his academic career in 1887 in Halle, from where he went to Göttingen in 1901, and finally to Freiburg in 1916, where he retired in 1928 but continued teaching as an emeritus. After the Nazis seized power in 1933, Husserl was soon subject to humiliations as a Jew. In 1934 he complained in a letter to one of his students that “as a non-Aryan I am deprived of my right to call myself a German and blamed of corrupting and poisoning the pure German spirit”. Under the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 Husserl was stripped of his license to teach in 1936. Shortly after his death in 1938, his extensive literary estate was evacuated to the Catholic University Leuven where the newly founded Husserl Archive has been taking care of it ever since.

Husserl's pupil Jan Patočka (1907 – 1977) played an important role in bringing phenomenology to Czechoslovakia. He and Ludwig Landgrebe were the first secretaries of the Czech-German *Cercle philosophique de Prague*, founded in 1934. The *Cercle* invited Husserl to come to Prague to give a series of lectures in 1935. These formed the nucleus of his final work *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie* [[The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology](#)]. Given the increasingly hostile situation in Germany, Patočka made desperate efforts to bring Husserl and his literary estate to Prague, but difficulties in raising the necessary funds delayed the project until Prague itself was no longer a secure place.

Due to the Nazi occupation and the war, academic and intellectual life was largely destroyed. While the Nazi occupation lasted for seven years, the subsequent struggle to restore democracy failed after less than three years. The communists seized power in February 1948, and freedom of thought was again suppressed for four long decades. The

ideas of Czech thinkers like Masaryk (with whom Husserl had a life-long friendship) or Emanuel Rádl were banned and replaced by communist ideology. Jan Patočka was not allowed to teach or publish for most of his life.

Consequently, the fact that Prostějov had in Husserl such a famous son fell into oblivion for 50 years. It was only after the collapse of the Communist regime in 1989 that a series of commemorative efforts were undertaken in Prostějov, most of them initiated by Ivan Blecha. Two conferences on Husserl were organized in 1991 and 2000 and, at these occasions, a square was named after the philosopher and a memorial plaque was unveiled at the city hall. In 2011, an exhibition on Husserl was set up in the Špalíček Gallery, one of the few surviving buildings of the Jewish ghetto, which had been demolished years earlier.

This issue of *Kritika & Kontext* was supposed to be a preview of the various commemorative events in Prostějov on Husserl's birthday on April 8, 2020. Unfortunately, the organizers have had to postpone the events to April 2021.

After an essay by Ivan Blecha on Husserl's relationship to Prostějov and Jewish life, a range of contemporary phenomenologists from East and West answer a few questions regarding the impact of Husserl's thought on the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its relevance today. This survey is followed by testimonies of contemporaries of Husserl – including wife Malvine to, T. G. Masaryk, Jan Patočka, Polish writer Stanisław Witkiewicz and the Russian philosopher Lev Shestov (the latter pair introduced by the US historian Marci Shore).

Two further essays by contemporary Slovak philosophers close the issue: František Novosád writes about the complex relationship between Husserl and Heidegger, and Jaroslava Vydrová observes echoes of Husserl's thinking in 20<sup>th</sup>-century arts.

In a short note on Husserl (included in the present issue), Patočka wrote in 1969: “I would not like to contribute to the rapidly growing number of commemorative plaques, inscriptions and general recollections, which are inundating us, making these memorials ineffective, so that we do not see them, do not notice them. All our artificial attempts to tell human memory what it must do and must not do” he continues, “are futile if humankind, or some enduring group of human beings, has no need to recall. Prague, for example, with its huge plaques of university professors, travellers, essayists, and philanthropists, whom no one knows any more, which nevertheless protrude from the façades of buildings, seems like Pompeii.”

However, Patočka says, if there is a group of people who are convinced that we ought to remember someone, then we should, and persistently so. In this case it is about remembering Edmund Husserl, a “European philosopher of a different language, born here”, as Patočka puts it. Husserl left his native country early and hence remained rather unknown at home. But Patočka is “happy to see a compatriot in him” and then explains to his Czech readership what a gift Husserl is, for them and for mankind.

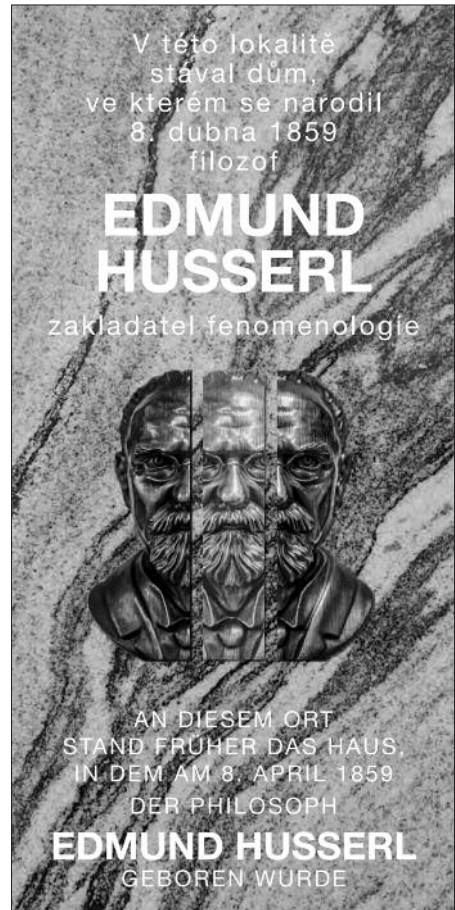
These reflections have inspired the editors of this issue to organize an event in April 2021 dedicated to Edmund Husserl. They are convinced that he deserves to be remembered in his hometown and native country, and, despite Patočka's warning, they have no reservations about commemorative plaques or volumes ...

From April 7 to 9, 2021, the journal *K&K*, the liberal arts college BISLA and the Vienna Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) with its Jan Patočka Program will organize, with the support of the city council of Prostějov, a series of events in honour of the city's eminent son. On his birthday, April 8, an international academic conference entitled

*Edmund Husserl's Prostějov and the Rebirth of European Reason* will reflect on the regional and universal aspects of Husserl's philosophy. The conference will take place in Prostějov's famous city hall and be opened with a keynote lecture by the distinguished phenomenologist Bernhard Waldenfels. On the following day, a public debate will discuss Husserl's significance today. A plaque, dedicated to Edmund Husserl and designed by the artist Miloš Karásek, will be unveiled where his birth house once stood. Finally, an exhibition with the title *Husserl Art Active: fenomenologické aproprieace* will feature works by Luděk Bárta and Miloš Karásek.

It is true that this is not the first time that Prostějov's famous son will be honoured in his hometown. But it would be great to give Husserl a more permanent presence in Prostějov. Given the conferences that took already place and the commemorative sites that already exist, it is only a small step to make Prostějov a place where the philosopher Edmund Husserl is not only remembered by its citizens but becomes a magnet that attracts the international academic community – a place where research and exchange inspired by phenomenology will become a widely known tradition.

Klaus NELLEN on behalf of his co-editors Ludger HAGEDORN and Jaroslava VYDROVÁ



Pamätná tabuľa E. Husserla na mieste jeho rodného domu v Prostějove  
A plaque in Prostějov where Husserl's house once stood (Autor Miloš Karásek)