Why did you decide to study Chinese?

It was quite interesting, because Chinese was secondary. My best friend Milena Hübschmannová studied languages of India, Hindi perhaps, after the Second World War in the Oriental Institute. School of Oriental Languages was affiliated to the OI. My friend persuaded me to study it too. But I hated India, India was fundamentally distant from all my interests. I didn’t like the large amount of the religions – I had a feeling it has nothing to do with a real life. But I started to care about Far east the more. Actually Milena was the person who incited me to it. And once I saw the Chinese TUŠOVÁ MALBA. I was interested in painting from my childhood, and I used to have a Balzac problem: I loved to read about the pictures and about their meaning and about what the painter was painting and so on, but when it came to the picture itself, I usually found it very vulgar or simplified, especially the Renaissance or Baroque art I found really strange. Although I was completely ignorant in this field, when I suddenly saw Chinese stuff, some landscape, I felt a huge spiritual dimension of the landscape and at the same moment a high degree of stylisation. As I was young then, I had no chance to formulate it precisely, but I think I felt a certain combination of abstraction and realism in it. Not a descriptive realism, but always some synecdoche – something was caught and one could think of the rest. Suddenly I felt THIS was the Art. After I understood the Chinese painting and especially the Chinese handcraft I could return to the European oil painting and I started to appreciate it as a method of expression – first in a technical way, later in the ideological way, too. Of course, what I say here about the European art, is applied to the traditional, not to the modern art.

Where did you see the Chinese picture?

It was definitely a reproduction in some book. A strange atmosphere was here after the War – Mathesius’ translations were extremely popular at the end of the war and after the war as well. The first Chinese translations were published in the twenties, but the response was not so good, I would say they disappeared totally. But suddenly, as the War begun, Mathesius’ translations had a huge influence. I was a child attending a first class of an elementary school when Mathesius was published for the first time, so I read it only at the end of the War. But I had a strong impression of the effect Mathesius had. His translations were read by people who ordinarily do not read poetry. Many people knew it, at our gymnasium it was a usual thing, but wherever one came it was the same. I used to listen to secret broadcasting from London, an once Jan Masaryk appealed to the audience using Li Taibo´s verses in Mathesius´ transaltion: Na bílém loži probouzím se tich, svítí to měsíc, či sem napad sníh? Chinese poetry had an immense impact on the Czech society. I always explain it as a result of the non-ideological character of the poetry, Chinese poetry was not the nationalist state poetry at all, but it was the poetry about the essential human feelings, about the love to the native place, about love, about thinking, beauty all around. It was something very powerful. I’m deeply convinced Mathesius had a large merit in the unusually positive approach to China, which was to be experienced here – and this approach didn’t change after the cataclysm of the year 1948. As far as the art is concerned, many materials speak about the great interest for Chinese art at the time of the first Czechoslovak republic. There were exhibitions, and I think it’s interesting that the most progressive Czech artists like Filla or Kuba were interested in Chinese art. Filla at the time he was in concentration camp talked about the Holland landscape with the relation to the Chinese landscape, and although his knowledge of China or even Chinese art wasn’t very detailed, his formulations are
surprisingly deep. First came the interest of the intellectuals and educated public, and such an interest is always very limited, than Mathesius came, who really hit the mark. During the high school years, I think it happened during my sixth class at the gymnasiu, I started to visit the Oriental Institute. It had to occur in 1947-1948. Pepik Fass told me he identified me – and he remembered my face from the courses in the OI. Those courses were so big! Hundreds of people registered each time, of course they didn’t persist in it, Chinese is difficult, the teachers were few and they were not so good sometimes, and their methods were built on the written texts, on literature. I remember professor Bartůšek, who was a quite strange person when it came to the politics, was a philologist, high-school teacher and later he worked at the OI. He had an intense concern about the languages – he studied Gipsy by the way, and his teaching method was built on radicals. He tested us, called out, and he used to say a number and we had to write the radical down immediately. The lessons took place in great halls at the OI, and the student from the faculty took part in it, because the teachers were so few. Except of the Far East institute Chinese was taught by this Mr. Bartůšek, later the first students started to teach, and as I came to the faculty in 1951, professor Průšek held still lectures and Berta Krebsová taught classical Chinese. All the Danas, Šejnohová, Šťovíčková, were in China. Průšek had lectures about Chinese history. After the war he begun to talk about the oldest history, and at the end of my first year he finished Five Dynasties. In my second year he lectures about the northern Song dynasty and than he had the heart attack and he didn’t lecture any more. Bofek Tkalcú taught, too. He was a gifted philologist, reportedly he knew Matthews dictionary by his head. His method was special, too. He started the lesson with one character and by the association chain he wrote more and more characters for the whole lesson. We didn’t learn much Chinese from him. The first lessons of Chinese grammar we got from Mrs. Kalousková, I was the third years student at that time. Palát, too, was a teacher. Průšek, Palát, Krebsová. Palát taught Chinese language. Průšek was according to my opinion the most important person there. Sinology, and Oriental disciplines too, had the different position: the political influence was not so direct here – after 1945 and especially after 1948 after the communist change – the expert knowledge was emphasized here. Stress lied on the ancient disciplines, but new disciplines were established, professor Průšek supported everyone who did one’s best. Everyone who wanted to work was accepted. Czech orientalistics as a whole underwent a very turbulent development: the small disciplines as KAUKAZOLOGIE as well as the Near East disciplines, and Korean and Mongolian studies..., there was no one to teach Vietnam studies, so these started later. The basic disciplines at the Far East department, let me ignore the others for now, was realized as a combination: the given language and history of Far east. Very interesting, for us it implied that we learned Chinese, we had no lectures in literature, which we compensated by the self study, and we took examinations. The history lessons were performed as I told you: professor Průšek taught it extremely minutely, with the enormous, profound knowledge (vhled) of the Chinese culture. We listened to the history of Five Dynasties and Northern Song, but professor Průšek examined us in the entire Chinese history. Of course we had to use literature to study it by ourselves. My examination took three hours, but from the older colleagues one could hear legends about the whole day exams. We had no grammar lessons, the basic source for us was the China Handbuch, Hänisch, as far as modern Chinese is concerned, we used Průšek´s textbook designed for Baťa – it was a very simple one. Immediately we started to read Zhao Shuli, without any explanation of grammar! We simply decoded the language, we were six students in the class, we prepared the vocabulary, and we guessed the meaning of the phrases. Our translation was or wasn’t approved. Later doctor Kalousková taught grammar, which was very interesting.
Do you remember the books you had used to study history?

No, I don´t...

Průšek´s material existed...

No, it didn´t he wrote it later, he was persuaded in the sixties to write at least some study material...

And do you remember the language of the book?

Yes, it was English. We divided the book according to the chapters, each of us read one part, from which he made notes and passed it to the colleagues. I think some Japanese was here who had written the Chinese history o we got some older notes. We always used to divide all the literature and deal with it individually, and pass it on. It was impossible to manage by any other way. We passed the exams only after the holiday – on the holiday time we could deal with the texts, except of the obligatory brigade-works. We had no copy machines, you know. So we wrote the notes by hand and passed it on.

Did Chinese teachers teach you?

No. Our first Chinese teacher came at the third year only. But After the second year, it had to be around 1953, we met our first Chinese: Chinese ensemble Zhongguo renmin jieban jin gewutuan came, approximately two hundred people. It was a part of the return visit program, one year before the Czechoslovak AUS travelled to China and Augustin Palát with Dana Kalvodová accompanied them and interpreted for them. By the way they were the first people who saw China by their own eyes. When they returned, they spoke about their immediate experience and all. The Chinese ensemble stayed here for over one month, and as they travelled around all Czechoslovakia by train, we used the wagon-lits and we travelled overnight from one place to another. The technicians travelled in advance and they had to build the stage. Sometimes we passed the night at the barracks in order to take a bath and so, but mostly we spent the night on the train. Me and Milena Velingerová were appointed to the crew, each of us had his own field of activity, I interpreted for the stage crew, physicians and anything the main crew did. Pavel Kratochvíl cared about the dancers, there was the choir and so. Me, Velingerová and Pavel Kratochvil were the interpreters, I don´t remember the other one. He was a boy and I believe he worked at the ministry of foreign affairs, I can look for it in case of need. I was the most official. I have my favourite story connected with this. Chinese soldiers were formed in the lines,