



RATTLE UP

My Boys

AN OCCASIONAL BROADSHEET FOR THOSE WITH AN INTEREST IN LONGSWORD DANCE

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Sword dance traditions in Czechoslovakia

In her book "Sword Dance & Drama", published in 1962, Violet Alford presents the only comprehensive list of European Sword Dance customs.

This list, plus a few translations of the work of the Viennese Professor Richard Wolfram, constitute the reference material for anyone wishing to study European Sword Dancing.

There are articles in the Folk Music Journal which describe foreign dance traditions, usually as a result of a one-off visit. Helpful though these articles are, they seldom deal with the background and the social context, nor are they much help in building up an international picture.

There are many difficulties for an amateur wishing to study customs in other countries. The cost of travel is high and travel within some countries can be complex.

Also any one who, like me, assumes that English is a universal international language, is due for a big surprise! Most of my foreign contacts speak English to an acceptable standard, but the problems of obtaining precise translations are immense. Agreeing a definition of a "traditional team" is difficult enough in our mother tongue - it is virtually impossible to agree an interpretation in Slovak.

A further problem in the study of foreign traditions is to contact the established traditions rather than folklore troupes. Official approaches often result in contact with state sponsored groups whose highly choreographed performances set out to present the full range of their countries traditions. To make contact with the village traditions is difficult.

Overseas contact

My international contacts started when I met the Antwerp sword dance team "Lange Wapper" when they attended the 1981 Malton Longsword Weekend.

Since then I have had regular contact with the team and with their leader, Renaat Van Craenenbroek. I have made visits to Antwerp for their sword dance event at Half Lent. Lange Wapper occasionally invite sword teams from other countries to these events. Grenoside are one such team who have made a guest appearance. In 1986 I was delighted to see their guests were a sword team from the village Strani in Czechoslovakia.

In spite of language problems I struck up a friendship with members of the Czech team and a short time later I was delighted to receive an invitation to visit Strani for their pre-Lent carnival.

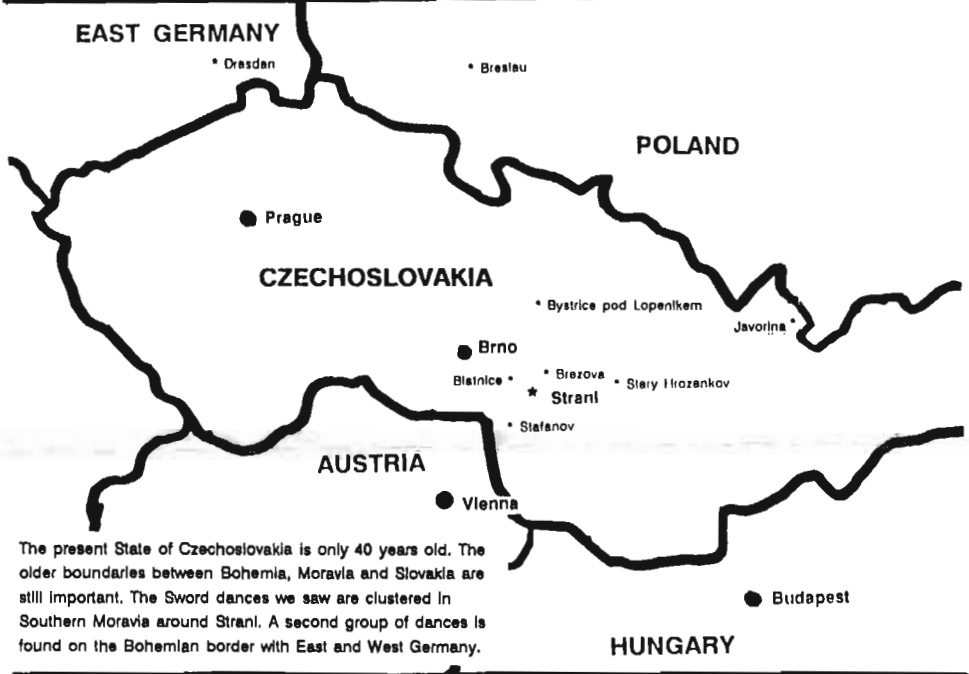
Visit to Czechoslovakia

We flew to Prague and joined up with Renaat van Craenenbroeck to travel by car to Southern Moravia. The village of Strani is 20km from the town of Uhersky Brod, in the foothills of the Slovak mountains, and 120km from the border with Austria.

Our host was Dr Pavel Popelka, a professional historian and a keen student of local customs. Pavel, like his grandfather before him, is in the Strani team.

Dr Popelka arranged a hectic schedule to ensure that we saw as many events as possible - with a bias towards dance, and particularly sword dance events.

On our arrival we found we were the guests of honour at a film show and talk. This presentation set the customs we were later to see in Moravia and Western Slovakia into a geographical context. The following



The present State of Czechoslovakia is only 40 years old. The older boundaries between Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia are still important. The Sword dances we saw are clustered in Southern Moravia around Strani. A second group of dances is found on the Bohemian border with East and West Germany.

eight days included numerous visits to local events. We also attended a Fasank, similar in format to an English Day of Dance. Five teams from various parts of the country toured the village.

The pre-lent traditions

Even though it is a Communist state this part of Czechoslovakia retains strong links with the Catholic Church. Most people still observe pre-Lent traditions, particularly those which involve feasting and revelling before the restrictions of Lent.

Dozens of the villages in Southern Moravia have pre-Lent traditions, known collectively as Maaques. In some of the villages more than one group observed the local tradition.

These Masque traditions all centre around a tour of the locality, visiting as many homes as possible and enjoying the hospitality of the householders. As in similar customs in other countries, the recipients of this intrusion believe a visit brings them good luck for the following year.

In some villages the perambulation is made by large groups in fancy dress, and many of these groups involve a dance team. In other villages the tour is made only by the dance team and musicians. In some places dancing has died out and the tour is made by drunken men in traditional costume.

The Recruits

By tradition, many of the dance teams comprise young men who are about to join the army - in some villages the team is actually called "The Recruits". The number of dancers varies from village to village, some teams have as few as four dancers but in some villages the size of the team is limited only by the number of recruits that year.

The Czechoslovakian Sword dance

We saw five teams who danced with swords - those from the villages of Strani, Bystrice pod Lopenikem, Komna, Stefanov and Borsky Mikulas.

There are many unusual features to their dances but most of the dance figures are recognisable to an English sword dancer. Clashing, circling, single-under and single-over are danced by most of the teams.

The tempo of the music and the hop step used by all teams results in a very different style to our sword dance. The Czech dances have various endings but the English sword lock is unknown.

Whilst an English sword dancer may recognise most of the moves, he would also be struck by the differences. The atmosphere is noticeably different - it is relaxed and carnival-like. Most of the dances are accompanied by lively music and the enthusiastic singing of a local song.

Most teams perform only at carnival time and seldom, if ever, dance outside their own village. Only at Strani has the sword dance become an independent element which is regularly displayed outside the village.

In the village of Stefanov the dance has a different form and only the Captain carries a sword. The figures of this dance are unlike others we know.

The music

Musical support for the teams varies from a lone accordion player to an eight piece band with many brass instruments. In two of the villages groups of women sang the accompaniment. Each village has its own traditional song.



The Strani tradition

Strani is a large village of approximately 3,000 people. Most of the sword dancers work at the local glass factory.

The village boasts at least three sword teams. The Senior team are one of the few village teams, as opposed to State sponsored groups, who have travelled extensively outside Czechoslovakia.

On the Saturday before Lent the Strani team hosted a "Fasank" or Day of Dance. Five groups from other villages in the region joined the Strani dancers on a tour of the village. In the evening the teams presented an excellent stage show.

But, in spite of the interest shown by the general public in the Fasank, the Strani dancers regard their main event as their "traditional" day, the day before Lent. This year the day was mid-week but this did not affect the numbers of dancers who turned out. The village fielded a number of teams, from nine year olds through to the senior team.

The Strani teams tour without any additional characters. A film of the team in 1949 showed numerous characters and shows other variations between current day and earlier performances in detail.

"The Strani team sing as they travel through the village on the day before the start of Lent, their 'traditional day'"

Each Strani team comprised five dancers plus their Gazda, the non-dancing leader. The Gazda is responsible for seeking the householder's permission to visit. He leads the team into the house, singing the village song as he goes. He collects gifts from the householder of food or drink which are spiked onto, or attached to, the sword he carries.

Their dance is performed with wooden "swords" approximately 90cm long which taper from the point to a D-shaped handle. The swords are 18mm thick and very rigid. They are painted red with brass studs arranged in patterns near the handles. Brass rings attached to the blade produce a ringing sound when the swords are shaken or clashed.

The dance lasts two and a half minutes but it is preceded by an introductory song and often followed by a short dramatic sequence. It invariably ends with more singing and social dancing.

The dancers walk into their chosen display area singing loudly and they circle round. They continue circling, banging the points of the swords on the floor.

At this point they break into a halting hop-step, performed with a distinctive lean forward of the body. They circle clockwise and counter-clockwise with swords on outside shoulders followed by single unders, single overs, clash hits and more circling.



The social dancing which ends the Strani sword dance performance. The dance is punctuated by the singing of the village song. Photographed at the Lange Wapper Half-Lent event in Antwerp.

The dance ends when the dancers break from the circle and seize a partner from the ladies of the choir, or from the household. They then perform a simple couples dance.

Sometimes the full performance includes a dramatic sequence in which one of the dancers is forced to lay face down over a stool. The other dancers beat him with their swords. The beaten dancer, suitably contrite, then sings a song offering promises for the future.

The performance ends with drinks all round, usually of Silvoveg, a potent plum brandy which is often home brewed. At many of the houses visited the householder also provides Fasank cakes which differ in shape and recipe from village to village. The cakes in Strani are like small doughnuts.

At neighbouring villages we saw local customs which include a sword dance, but dance and music were different.



"The Recruits" of Bystřice pod Lopenikem. The number varies - we saw them with five dancers but this photo shows seven.



The village of Stefanov sports two dance teams, one dresses in military style uniform whilst the other team dress in fancy dress. Only the leader and the non-dancing characters carry swords. The Captain dances in the centre of the circle and leaps high in the air, by custom to 'encourage the crops to grow tall'.



The Komna tradition

In the village of Komna we saw a similar pre-Lent tradition which took a different format.

On the Saturday before Lent, we found a high spirited group of 40 or more men and women. They were all dressed in a variety of traditional costumes and modern fancy dress. In addition to clowns, ghosts and a whole host of other characters, the group also involved a sword dance team.

This team comprised a leader dressed in peaked cap and military style uniform, accompanied by four sword dancers. The dancers were dressed in black trousers, black riding boots, black jackets with a brightly coloured triangular scarf tied round their waist and many artificial flowers added to their hats.

The dancers, in common with most other people involved in the tour, had red added to their faces. It was more carefully applied to the dancers than for other characters and looked like makeup.

The leader and the dancers carried realistic metal swords, very like cavalry sabres, approx 80cm long.

Amongst the characters in the entourage are some who would recognise from various British traditions. There is a man dressed as a woman - the equivalent of our Beazy? Three sweeps "bring good luck"

The group includes a well turned out "couple" who act in a restrained and dignified manner, much the

same role played by the Lord and Lady in similar English traditions. As with our traditions, the Lady's part was played by a man dressed in female attire. A similar cross dresser - a young boy dressed as a bride, was continually chased by a dissolute soldier.

In the Komna tradition not all female parts are taken by cross dressers. Two women accompany the dance team and are dressed in a similar costume to the sword dancers. They play a part in the sword dance by one of them entering the hilt and point ring made by six dancers. The woman then beats a tambourine and skips round as the dancers circle them. I understand that this feature is a long established part of the tradition and not, as I suspected, a recent addition.

Unlike the Strani dance team, who often dance inside, the Komna team always perform outside the door of the house. A conventionally dressed organiser, carrying his wand of office, knocks on the door and, if a response is forthcoming, the four sword dancers perform their dance. The other characters also prance around in a crude and unstructured social dance.

The householder invariably gives the visitors a gift of food or drink which is collected by women who carry baskets. The gifts are seldom money, mainly because of legislation. A loud cheer goes up from the whole party when a gift is handed over.

In other villages the characters vary, often depending on the availability of fancy dress costume. We saw characters which included convicts, bears, archers and

many more. The characters at many villages include a hunch-backed character, usually a dwarf and I understand that such dwarfs are in great demand for traditional events.



At Stary Hrozankov we saw another interesting character, a straw man, with bunches of straw attached to all limbs and a conical straw hat. This character could be played by a man or a woman, possibly because of the effective disguise. Many women take part in the Masque teams.

Any conclusions?

The visit to Czechoslovakia was hectic, fascinating and most enjoyable. I wish, however, that I could claim that it had helped to spill some light on possible international links between sword dance traditions.

But it didn't.

There are many elements in the Czechoslovakian pre-lent traditions which have a parallel here - although not always with our sword dance customs. The perambulation around the village can be likened to the Northern tradition of Whit Walks or to the Beating of the Bounds. The guizers of Moravia have their counterparts in the Toms and Cadgers who accompanied earlier English Longsword dance teams. Similarities exist with the characters who accompany the Goathland Plough stots, or they can be compared with Sweeps Parades.

Many of the characters have a parallel in England - the cake bearer in some Oxfordshire Morris teams bears more than a passing resemblance to the Strani Gazda who uses his sword to collect gifts.

Such characters as the Sweep, the Lord and Lady, the Bride - all have counterparts in some of our traditions. Some early Repper dance teams were accompanied by a crew who fired a cannon when they received a gift - just as in Komna.

But for all the similarities, there are some significant differences. The Czech sword dance is shorter, less "developed" and choreographically more primitive. It is usually more of an integral part of the total tradition than is the case in England.

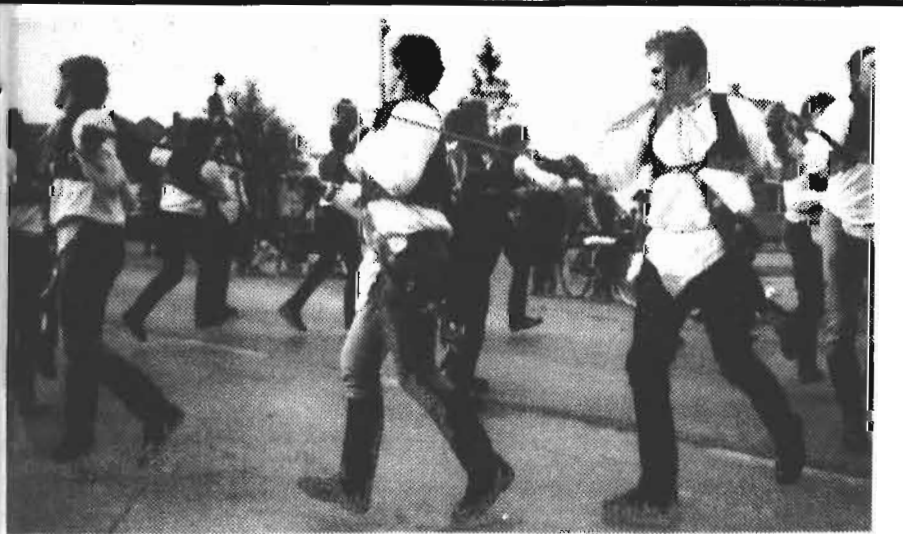
The temptation to speculate is great. My Flemish colleague saw what he regards as conclusive evidence that the Czech tradition represents an unsophisticated version of a tradition which has spread throughout Europe, reaching the level of sophistication we see in our dances in England.

But the Czech traditions could just as easily be a degenerate version of a tradition which developed in a different way in various parts of the Continent.

Such speculation is pointless. Although I cannot report a clear cut conclusion as a result of my visit, never-the-less it helped to underline just how wide spread and varied are such sword dance traditions.

It seems that many of the teams listed in Violet Alford's book are still active. Sword dancing, thought by many to be of English, or more usually, of Yorkshire origin, is alive and popular in Moravia, Slovakia, Germany, Italy, Belgium ...

and maybe even more places.



There are at least two teams from the village of Borsky Mikulas. They involve variable numbers of dancers.

RATTLE UP, YOU GUYS

by Mike Jensen

I know that many other teams go abroad regularly, some almost casually. Nevertheless, Carlisle Sword were delighted by the invitation from Folklore Canada International to take part in two large festivals in Drummondville, Quebec, and Cornwall, Ontario.

For almost all of us, this was to be a new experience. Not that we're not seasoned travellers; there are few native Cumbrians in the team so we have all travelled to be up here, practice night is a thirty-mile round trip, and "away" weekends of dance invariably start with at least a hundred-mile drive South!

However, Canada took us by surprise: photographers at the airport; the yellow school bus; the straight road across the vast flat land; long-nosed trucks with chrome smokestacks; the heat that made us struggle for breath; and everything in French: "L'equipe de la Grande Bretagne est demande a l'information, s'il vous plait".

And for their part?... "You are not," said Louise, our guide, a few days later, "what we expected the English to be. We thought you would be shy and retiring".

For the organisers these festivals were commercial events in their drive for tourism. In Drummondville, they had a million dollar budget (half a million pounds) including grants totalling 200,000\$. The Festival was estimated to attract 14 million\$ of trade!

The town festivals were run by local people. In Cornwall, the foreign teams were lodged with families. Indeed, the only folk enthusiasts in evidence were those who participated in Heritage '85, workshops given by the visiting teams.

Performances were aimed at a general public with a keen interest in spectacle, and the needs of local television companies.

Now, in our team Longsword has to fight for its place in the programme. (Shame...Ed). The first parade took place with the temperature somewhere around 40C. We chose the coolest kit - longsword - and the Flamborough dance, to include as many dancers as possible.

Flamborough could have been made as a procession: we walked displaying the lock until, at a signal to dance, we drew the swords. The astonishment from the crowd was electrifying; they had never seen this before. After a couple of figures, we re-made the lock: another roar of amazement and approval.

This was our first experience of the Canadians' open and generous response to performance. Audiences applauded an individual figure - the "clew" in Papa Stour, for example - or, on one heady occasion, a simple "turn out". To dance for those people was to feel appreciated.

We won the (very necessary) standing ovation in the big air-conditioned stadium but got more pleasure, I judge, from the warm response in the little Quebecois village of Saint Elphege where we made our "visite chez les coulins" (one of a series of visits by the international teams to small villages in the area). We out-stayed our schedule (but not our welcome) there by over two hours, leaving well after midnight.

Our new friends turned up later in the week to carry the torches for us in a night-time procession through a crowd of 100,000 and an atmosphere that defies description. Formidable.

Disaster came closest when once, half way through Papa Stour, Jeff Lawson made it known that his contact lens was on the floor. Now, Carlisle and contact lenses go back a long way, and with hardly a falter, Ian Snelling saw the lens, picked it up, and put it in his mouth, needing both hands to raise the lock.

One of my lasting memories of the tour is of a fine evening in the Village Quebecois d'Antan. We had just danced the Cumberland Longsword; not far away the Haitians were doing a harvest dance in the dust, chipmunk ran across the dirt road. Quietly, sitting there I realised where we were, and still couldn't quite believe it.

I think we left the Canadians with some memories of Longsword. Few of them seemed ever to have seen the like before, and most of them would have gladly seen more. These are some of the comments of Dr. Aile in the Drummondville L'Express:

"Ce numero cloturait une suite de performances appreciees. Mais la Danse des Sabres fournit l'occasion aux artistes qui l'excutent de faire preuve de maitrise dans l'enchevetrement complexe qui aboutit a un 'noeud de sabres".

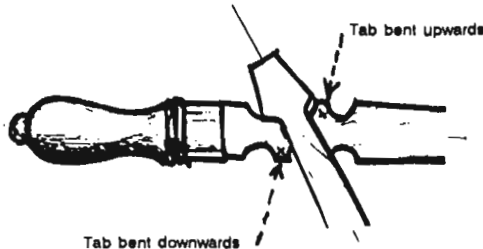
Coming home was the hardest part. We left Cornwall while the Mexicans were still trying to raise the return fare, and with the news that three of the Poles had defected. Some of us are enquiring about Immigration regulations.

There seems to be a lot of interest in Longsword in the whole North America. Four copies of the Broadsheet go to America and Tony Barrand, of Boston University, is preparing a book with sizeable reference to Sword dancing. I would welcome news of other experiences from abroad ... Editor

From Ron Shuttleworth..

I was interested in the description of swords in RUMB, particularly the Ampleforth one. It seems odd to me that anyone would deliberately cut into the base of the blade just where it would cause weakness.

The prosaic explanation may be that these were already there in the metal that was used - certainly those semicircular slots would provide a very secure means of fixing the blade into some piece of machinery.



There is another possibility which could only be verified by checking fit and angles using the real thing, and if the sword-lock was similar to the Sleights one in the photo on page one, ie with the points only just showing beyond the other sword. If two of the tabs between the slots at the base of the blade were bent outwards a little, they might locate with the 'arrow' tip of the next sword in a way which would make the completed lock into a very strong and indestructible unit. The opposite tabs could have been put in to conceal the device from all but the most detailed inspection. The people viewing the blade recovered from the garden may well have overlooked this, believing it due to more recent damage.

When considering the varying lengths of swords, I suggest that attention should be paid to the average height of the team using them. Small men with shortish swords would be in much the same case as tall men with longer ones - a point for revivalists to consider.

I have used the swords in a dance and they are exceptionally well balanced. They also give an even bend over the full blade length, unaffected by the stiffness caused to other swords by the handle ...Editor

Dear Trevor

I'm writing to tell you of our forthcoming dance out. The next outing will be our first anniversary on Boxing Day in and around the villages. We shall start here around 12.00.

Sometime in January we shall be at the plough service in Kirkby Malzeard church, whenever the service is. It depends which village gets the plough first!

We have also managed to get a team together to come to the Rydale Longsword Weekend in May.

An article recently appeared in the local paper about the death of Don Gill. We visited Don's house last June and danced in the street outside his house. Although he suffered from Parkinson's disease, his wife brought him to the door in a wheelchair.

He seemed to enjoy our dancing but said we should be leaping over the swords "like donkeys". He also showed us his kit which was an enormous white shirt with tiny ribbons on each shoulder, a gigantic pair of green corduroy breeches and yellow socks. He said everybody's kit was the same size they just wore bigger or smaller belts. He was the seventh dancer and stood in if anyone else was away, which meant he could dance anywhere, but he didn't know how to make the lock because "t'others did it".

It was sad to hear of his death and we believe there is only one man left from that team of the 30's.

The first time I wrote to you I mentioned some movie films that we had come across which have the Kirkby dance on them. These are old nitrate films that can not be shown again because they will deteriorate beyond repair. They belong to the Yorkshire Film Archive who need money to convert them on to new film. They already have a video taken from the screen at the last showing but it is fairly poor quality. The sword dance appears twice on this video, once at Kirkby gala and once at Galphay Manor.

from Ted Dodsworth

Thanks for the details Ted.

I wonder if readers would be prepared to contribute to a fund to safeguard the old film and make good copies?

Surely a few more team Secretaries must know how to write! A postcard, or even a phone call, giving news of your outings etc would be welcome.

BOXING DAY 1988

Check first for accurate details. Times approximate!

Flamborough (subject to a musician!)

- 11.00 Flaneburgh Hotel
- 12.00 Viking Hotel
- 1.00 Rose & Crown
- 2.00 Timoneer Hotel
- 2.30 Dog & Duck Square

Grenoside

- 11.00 The Harrow, Grenoside

Handsworth

- 11.15 The Crown, Woodhouse
- 12.00 Parish Church, Handsworth

Highside (Kirkby Malzeard)

"Opening times" in Kirkby Malzeard

Spenn Valley

- 12.00 Old Packhorse, Hartshead Mo
- 12.45 The Royal, Cleokheaton
- 1.15 Old Saw, Gomersal
- 2.30 Wheatsheaf, Gomersal

& NEW YEAR

Barnsley Sunday January 1st

- 12.30 'ish Spencers Arms, Cawthorne

Ebor Morris January 8th

- Millington, near York

Goathland Ploughstots January 14th

- 10.00 Goathland and Darnholm

Kirkburton Sunday, January 1st

- 12.15 Carlton Club
- 1.15 George Inn
- 2.30 Woodman Inn, Thunderbridge

The next issue will carry an article on the Goathland Plough Stots which deals mainly with the 1923 revival and the teams up to the late 1950's. The article will feature a number of photos of the team which were previously unpublished.

It will also include details of a new survey of sword dance teams to update the information collected in 1980 and 1985.

Contributions welcome....

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