



The sport of mushroom picking

This entry was the winner of the BCSA's 2020 essay competition. The writer, Anna Parker, is a PhD student in history at the University of Cambridge. Her research focuses on ordinary people's lives in Renaissance Prague, but she also teaches and lectures more widely on early modern European history. In addition to her research, she writes about arts, design and culture, and she is on the London Library Emerging Writer's Programme for 2020-1. If anyone wishes to get in touch and share mushroom stories with her (she thinks this is a theme she'll write on again one day), they are welcome to e-mail her at ap800@cam.ac.uk

It is a common claim among Czechs that mushroom picking is their 'national sport'. This is no throwaway quip. Foraging for fungi is a source of entertainment; it involves physical exertion; it is governed by rules, and it can end in either success (a full basket) or failure (an empty one). Most importantly, like all sports, mushroom picking is a rich source of collective and personal memory. These strands, woven together, tell the story of a nation in transition.

English people have their stadiums: Wembley, Lord's, Old Trafford and Twickenham. The Czechs meet on their own arena, the lush, dew-soaked grass on the forest floor. The playing greens are everywhere: the acres of spruce forest that stretch across Bohemia and Moravia, the national parks adjacent to cities, or a wooded verge on the side of a main road. Competitors are equipped with a woven wicker basket, a stick with which to push aside foliage, and a flick knife, used to separate the mushroom from its stem and to clean off any worms. Sturdy beige walking boots and white socks, pulled up high, are often worn but not required.

The mushroom-picking season lasts from May to September. Outside this period, around my family's dinner table in Prague, there is intense discussion about the state of the playing fields. Are they too dry, stunting growth? Are they too damp, risking waterlogging? Spells of rain are made tolerable by the observation that the water will help the

mushrooms. Reports from friends who have been out in the countryside are mulled over for hints as to this year's crop. News that the conditions look favourable is received with approval all round.

When my relatives set out to make the best of a good growing season, they are spurred on by a sense of rivalry. My family has a cottage in the Jizera Mountains in north Bohemia, where I would spend every summer as a child. It is paradise for the horticulturalist. Yellow loosestrife forms a thick bank of sun-coloured corn cobs in the front garden, masterfully cultivated by my proprietorial great-aunt. The back, which is not required to appeal to the critical eyes of passers-by, is an untended meadow of flowers, inclining gently upwards to a forest behind.

Each morning, I would be doused in tick repellent, my trousers tucked into my socks and a red and white spotted scarf tied around my head. Suitably prepared, I would accompany my grandmother across the meadow and into the forest, where play would begin. Our primary competitor was our neighbour from the cottage

on the left. Generally, relations with her were very good. She often came over during the afternoon for a bottle of lager. Hours passed with her sitting on a plastic chair, legs planted apart, her elbows on her knees, chain smoking and conspiratorially sharing local gossip.

There was a dark underside to this warm camaraderie. When it came to mushroom picking, our neighbour was no teammate of

ours. My grandmother swore in Czech's clattering consonants, cursing *ta kráva* (that cow) as we found another cut stem nestled at the foot of a pine, the mushroom already harvested by our more adept adversary. As a former wing-attack on the Czech National Handball Team, my grandmother's love of victory has never left her. Unfortunately, her athlete's discipline has. Never able to get out of bed early enough, we always ambled into the forest many hours after the starting gun of dawn's break.

Located on the border with Poland, the cottage from which we set out every day sits on historically contested land. People have been driven out, frontiers have inched back



and forth, and industries have thrived and declined. The spruce forest in which we foraged was planted by German glassmakers in the sixteenth century. Now, nineteenth-century glass factories with tall brick chimneys are left abandoned among the conifers, odd relics between the pubs, pensions and ski lifts. The surrounding rivers are full of glass beads that were thrown out when manufacturing was halted. A brook with particularly rich pickings ran by the side of the local tennis court. Ankle-deep in water, my sister and I fished for the colourful pearls while my grandmother and great-aunt played set after set of tennis on the clay court, red dust staining their tennis whites.

As part of the Sudetenland, the Jizera Mountains were annexed by Hitler in 1938. In 1945, following the Second World War, the area's German glass-making inhabitants were expelled and replaced by Czech settlers. The cottage entered our family by way of my great-great uncle. Having spent time in prison for his criticism of the communist regime, he was released in 1959, the year of Stalin's death and the start of communism's slow thaw. My great-great uncle was financially compensated for his prison term and used this money to buy the cottage, where he retreated to recover from the ordeal of incarceration.

In the decades between Stalin's death and the fall of communism in 1989, the fields and forest around the cottage served a practical function for my great-great uncle and his family. In English, the term 'sport' originally referred to activities that required an interaction with nature: hunting, shooting and fishing. These are pursuits that make a play and spectacle out of satisfying the primal urge to eat. Under the Industrial Plan, the Czech lands operated with a shortage economy, which meant that consumer goods were lacking in both quantity and quality. Mushroom picking satisfied a hunger for variety.

The best of mushrooms is the delicate, creamy-white hřibek (*boletus edulis*, or porcini). I have little experience of these: few were left to us by our early-rising neighbour. Second comes the hřib hnědý (*bay bolete*), which wears a chestnut cap, on the underside of which is a yellow sponge flecked with pores. Sliced finely, dried under the sun and stored in glass jars that are traded among friends, they last well, imparting an earthy meatiness to the clear soups and creamy sauces integral to the Czech diet. Telling these good fungi apart from the

bitter-tasting or poisonous needs some training. Mushroom manuals abound for the studious amateur. Yet, like most, I learnt by being shown. My grandmother pointed out the right ones, using what she had been told by her own mother. This is expertise that comes from interaction with the natural world, guiding you by sight, smell and touch. Satisfying the appetite for a varied plate, sporting activities meet another hunger: the need to belong, to have a place in the world. The communist government knew the importance of sport to the collective memory that makes up nationhood. Starting in 1955, a mass gymnastics event known as the Spartakiáda was held at the Strahov stadium every five years to celebrate the 1945 liberation of Czechoslovakia. In contrast to these highly manufactured public sporting events, mushroom picking is an example of the creation of meaning from the ground up, growing out of the desires and interests of people themselves.

Foraging for fungi is a more subtle sport than gymnastics, but at the same time, it is heavier with meaning: it carries a significance that existed before, and survives, changes of political regime. For a people whose boundaries have shifted around them, there is a consistency in looking at the ground, peering at the foot of trees, thinking only of the tracks followed by their next-door neighbour. My family's cottage, and the mushroom-rich forest onto which it backs, is land that has been reclaimed and renegotiated, but the practice of picking, and the shared knowledge and joy of discovery that accompanies the activity, connects generations to one another. Elastic rather than exclusionary, this is knowledge that can be shared with outsiders who want to learn. The foragers seek a fungus that, if cut at the stump, will regenerate again from the mass of tendrils out of sight. Over and over again, with resilience, the mushrooms will push up from the dirt, raising their hats towards the dappled forest light.

In a post-communist society, it could be argued that Czechs are less connected to their soil. Buoyed by the tides of liberalised capitalism, Czechs have followed the opportunities of the free market economy. In 2004, after the country joined the European Union, many settled in England. Uprooted, Czechs nonetheless carry their sport with them, finding new playing fields wherever they go. During the media hysteria that accompanied the opening of borders to the old Eastern bloc, *The Daily Mail* ran a series of headlines crying 'Eastern European gangs harvest OUR fungi from

OUR parks'. In an attempt to protect the local eco-system from such 'gangs', London parks continue to forbid the picking of mushrooms with severe signs in black and yellow. My Czech mother, settled in England with English children, looks on with desire at a rich crop of *bedla vysoká* (*parasol mushrooms*) merrily growing unchecked on our local common. Fearful of a telling-off from the horse-bound park rangers, she hides her pickings under her coat and hurries back to the car park.

My otherwise law-abiding mother's furtiveness is an example of the cultural unfamiliarity that can exist between migrant and native, especially when it comes to the contested subjects of sport and food. The Czech enthusiasm for foraging is slightly odd to English people, among whom mushroom picking is more commonly practised by professional foragers. Most of my English friends are horrified at the risk of poisoning that accompanies a self-picked mushroom. 'Stop!' shouted a friend as I reached towards a delicious, perfect-looking hřib hnědý emerging perkily from a grass bank. Unsettled by her visible anxiety, I withdrew my hand. I trust myself; my family have taught me the rules of the game and I have practised it many times. But those who do not know the customs are intensely fearful of losing, which in this case means getting sick. But, surely, high stakes are exactly what make a sport a sport?

With the potential for high drama and significant loss, mushroom picking is without doubt a national sport: it is a sport that also shapes the national experience. Yet, this is not the rigid symbolic connection between land and people often evoked by nationalist politicians, writers and philosophers. Rather, mushroom picking is an example of the shared frame of reference that is constructed by layers of play, place and memory. Pastimes that rely on bodily and sensory knowledge stick particularly in our memories because their roots are deep inside us, formed by repeated practices that twist themselves into our being. While my grandmother lamented the efficient work of our neighbour, I would turn my attention to the bilberry bushes that covered the forest floor. I parted the bright green leaves with their oily, almost plastic-like sheen, and gently cupped the indigo fruit with the pads of my index finger and thumb, pulling it easily away at the stem.