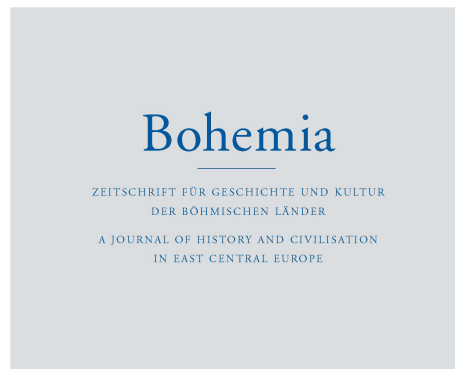


Citation style

Sabatos, Charles D.: Rezension über: Doubravka Olšáková (ed.): Eleanor Wheeler, Letters from Prague, 1947–1957, Berlin ; Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022, in: Bohemia. Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur der böhmischen Länder, 62 (2022), 1, S. 131-133, <https://recensio-stag.lorax.syslab.com/r/9bd4b2e2fb914096bd2f551b703f713d>



copyright

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

Wheeler, Eleanor: Letters from Prague. 1947-1957. Edited by Doubravka Olšáková.
De Gruyter, Berlin 2022, 410 pp., ISBN 978-3-11-069040-8.

Kalinová, Agneša/Juráňová, Jana: My Seven Lives. Jana Juráňová in Conversation with Agneša Kalinová. Translated by Julia and Peter Sherwood.

Purdue University Press, West Lafayette 2021, 456 pp., ISBN 978-1-61249-719-8.

Central and East European gender studies is an expanding field, but primary sources in English on women's lives in the region are still relatively limited. One welcome development is the recent appearance of two memoirs from 20th-century Czechoslovakia. Eleanor Mitchell Wheeler (1907-1981) and her husband George Wheeler were American citizens who moved to Prague in 1947 and stayed until 1971. Agneša Kalinová (1924-2014) was a Slovak journalist and editor who emigrated to Munich in the 1970s with her husband Ladislav (Laco) Ján Kalina and their daughter Júlia (a prolific translator of Slovak literature into English, who has produced this translation of her mother's memoirs.) Although Wheeler's *Letters from Prague* (based on correspondence with friends back in the US) covers the relatively limited period of 1947 to 1957, and Kalinová's *My Seven Lives* (presented in the form of a dialogue with the writer Jana Juráňová) spans most of the 20th century, both books provide the perspectives of remarkable women who were actively engaged in the mid-century Czechoslovak cultural scene.

The Wheelers were both active in leftist causes (which hampered George Wheeler's career in government service, leading to his decision to emigrate), and Eleanor Wheeler's letters reveal a commitment to social justice on both sides of the Cold War divide. As the daughter of an American missionary, Wheeler herself had been raised in several foreign countries, including Soviet Ukraine, and her previous knowledge of Russian helped her to learn Czech relatively quickly, leading to her own career as a translator. Although many of her views are strikingly progressive even by today's standards, Wheeler's letters home accentuate the positive aspects of life under socialism, particularly those beneficial to a working mother of four young children, such as free medical care and a rigorous educational system. Wheeler's children come across as strikingly mature and articulate, and her enlightened interactions with them are among the highlights of her letters. Through her interactions with African-American expatriates in Prague, Wheeler is aware of the relative lack of racism, at least in the blatant forms of discrimination that were almost universal in the US at the time, but is also sensitive to casual anti-Semitism and widespread anti-Roma prejudice.

As a fluent Czech speaker, Wheeler follows the cultural developments of the period, including the 1955 polemic between the poet Pavel Kohout and the critic Jan Trefulka (the latter's expulsion from the Communist Party was later the partial inspiration for Milan Kundera's novel *The Joke*.) In Wheeler's account, Trefulka was rightfully criticized for his characterization of Kohout's readers as "hothouse youth who [...] get the gifts of socialism handed to them on a platter," and she adds that she has mentioned this incident "partly to show what type of real controversy does exist in the cultural world here." (p. 244-245) Wheeler's letters gradually begin to

reflect the increasing openness in Czechoslovak public discourse at the beginning of the post-Stalinist “Thaw,” such as her extensive discussion of the 2nd Czechoslovak Writer’s Union Congress in 1956, which she describes as an “atmosphere [...] of ebullient and, at times, anarchic criticism.” (p. 297) Wheeler herself begins to discuss politically sensitive issues more openly, although as she observes later that year, “We have lost many illusions, but we still can see that socialism works, and works better than capitalism, and is improving.” (p. 307) Her adopted homeland is far from perfect, but she criticizes the self-centered view of the world dominating US politics (which holds true to a considerable extent today): “The preoccupation with American problems first is especially dangerous in the main citadel of world imperialism [...] for Americans, isolation from the rest of the world is dangerous, we think.” (p. 333)

Wheeler’s volume is based on a collection held in the archives of the University of Washington in Seattle, which were edited for a projected publication by an unidentified recipient in the late 1960s or 1970s. While the editor Doubravka Olšáková’s introduction provides historical and biographical background and numerous footnotes (some of which seem unnecessarily general) it begins somewhat confusingly with obituaries for Eleanor and George Wheeler, which would have fit better at the end of the letters, while the source of the manuscript is not explained until an editorial note near the end of the book. Although the Wheelers remained in Czechoslovakia through the Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact invasion, the letters end in December 1957, with only two letters from 1968 and 1970 added in a “postface.” These apparently come from a family archive whose correspondence continues throughout the 1960s, but were not part of the Seattle collection. As intriguing as it is to follow Wheeler’s descriptions through the early period of communist transition, it would have been even more enlightening to follow her family’s experience through the 1960s, rightfully considered the most culturally and politically eventful decade of modern Czech history.

As Agneša Kalinová notes at the beginning of her memoir, “a lifelong motif for me [is] something Central European: discontinuity.” (p. 1) She recalls her native Prešov as a “relatively small city [with] a livelier cultural life than many Slovak towns of comparable size,” as well as a “colorful mix of people [who] coexisted [...] in apparent harmony.” (p. 3) The “seven lives” of the title include: 1) her happy childhood and early adolescence in the interwar First Republic; 2) the increasing persecution in the wartime Slovak state and her escape to Hungary where she hid in a convent; 3) her life as a young woman in Bratislava during the postwar and early socialist years; 4) her participation in the cultural liberalization culminating in the “Prague Spring”; 5) the subsequent harassment and brief imprisonment during the “normalization” regime; 6) exile in Germany, where she remained alone after her husband’s premature death; and 7) the happier period after 1989, when she was able to return for frequent visits to Slovakia. Although Kalinová’s parents had been educated in Hungarian, her generation spoke mostly Slovak, often in the regional Šariš dialect, and she also read in French and German. By 1938, tolerance was giving way to wartime nationalism, and when the first deportations of young unmarried women began in 1942, Kalinová was exempted by faking a medical condition. After she ille-

gally escaped with family friends over the Hungarian border, her relatives in Budapest decided to send her to stay in a convent, where she lived for two and a half years. Reunited with other survivors after the war, she gradually learned further details on those who did not return, including her parents, and was haunted by the vanished faces of family and friends: "I told myself that I couldn't possibly mourn so many people, that I had to select just a few to mourn." (p. 89)

Like many in her generation who had lived through the war, Kalinová saw the possibility of a better future under socialism: "I thought that we would cherry-pick the most attractive elements of the Soviet system while building on the best democratic traditions of interwar Czechoslovakia." (p. 101) During this period, when she and her husband were able to meet prominent international visitors, "the cultural scene in Bratislava was very lively, with a full slate of events and impassioned discussions." (p. 112) A turning point in Kalinová's life came in 1952 when she was hired by the influential cultural and political weekly *Kultúrny život* (Cultural life). By the mid-1960s, although the movement toward reform felt like "a kind of bizarre, unpredictable dance" of steps forward and backward, the "oppressive atmosphere of fear had lifted." (p. 193) Kalinová describes her hopes for the Prague Spring: "in a nutshell: let's get rid of all the morons and ignoramuses in the top jobs and let's do it all ourselves, more smartly." (p. 200)

After the Warsaw Pact invasion, the Kalina family left for Vienna, only to return after a week. When the borders closed, they were subjected to nearly a decade of persecution (including imprisonment) before they were given permission to emigrate to Munich, where Laco Kalina died in 1981. Kalinová devoted herself to her work at Radio Free Europe, and she continued working at their new branch in Bratislava in 1990, after the Velvet Revolution, where she watched the Slovak independence movement with dismay: "I was convinced that it was better for Slovakia to develop within a wider context, that it needed the Czech yardstick and the broader horizon, and at the same time, that the Czechs needed the distinct Slovak perspective as a contrast to their elitism and illusions of grandeur." However, she concludes in retrospect that the separation of the two countries may have been "the best and least painful solution." (p. 339-340) Along with the structure provided by Jana Juráňová's insightful but inobtrusive questions, the book benefits from the unique insight of the translator Júlia Sherwood, who lived through many of its key events herself. While it is occasionally difficult to follow the numerous relatives and friends who reappear across decades, there is a detailed appendix that includes almost everyone mentioned in the text, many prominent in the Czechoslovak cultural scene.

Eleanor Mitchell Wheeler's *Letters from Prague* and Agneša Kalinová's *My Seven Lives* provide intriguing portraits of 20th-century Czechoslovakia by women whose experiences were not entirely typical, but which display the intensity of cultural and literary life in the region. Both are valuable sources for specialists of social and gender history, as well as (Kalinová's in particular) for students of Slovak, Czech, and Central European culture.