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## **“There Is Nothing New Out Here!” A Case Study of Communication Strategies and Gender Dynamics in the First World War Family Correspondence**

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*Abstract:* The article is a case study based on two collections of letters between couples in Moravia during the Great War. Using these collections that include either both or – rather uniquely – only the woman’s side of the correspondence, the author tries to follow the basic strategies employed by respective parties to the wartime dialogue between the frontline and the home front, ranging from discursive silence to standardized “calming phrases” and strategies, all the way to the moments when these strategies crumble under the weight of the events. In parallel, the text also focuses on the way these strategies reflected the changing gender structures and relations in wartime society, particularly the sense of empowered femininity and weakened masculinity, respectively.

*Keywords:* First World War – personal correspondence – wartime society – home front – gender relations – gender history

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*“Dear daddy! Many heartfelt hugs and kisses from us. No mail has arrived today. There is nothing new out here! We have nice weather again. Are you getting mail from me alright? And the papers? I’ll be sending you a small box tomorrow again! Write as soon as you can to let me know you are back, I can hardly wait to hear. Love and kisses, Mářa and Milda.”*

Marie Zemanová to her husband, April 9, 1918<sup>1</sup>

In early April 1918, with Russia out of the picture for good, German offensives on the Western Front losing their initial momentum, and American troops finally starting to trickle into the trenches, the Great War in France and Belgium has entered its decisive phase. At the same time, Austro-Hungarian army was building up its strength

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1 Marie Zemanová to Pavel Zeman, 9 April 1918, The Zeman Letters, Vlastivědné muzeum v Olomouci (VMO), collection “Novodobé dějiny – Odboj”, acquisition number 67/2016. [hereafter cited only by the names of the correspondents and the date, as all the letters come from the same collection]. I would like to express many thanks to Dr. Karel Podolský, the curator of the Modern History and the Military History Collections at the Vlastivědné muzeum v Olomouci, who made me aware of the very existence of this recently discovered collection of files in the first place, and allowed me to study it extensively afterwards.

for a final push against the Entente lines on the Piave River, while French, British, Serbian and Greek troops were preparing for the same in the Macedonian mountains. On this largely forgotten front, in a backwater stillness of the Albanian port town of Durazzo (Durrës) on the Adriatic coast, the *Feldpostkarte* (field post card) quoted above in full was about to find its recipient soon. Marie Zemanová, a housewife from Olomouc (Olmütz), sent it to her husband, a thirty-five year old *Zugsführer* (sergeant) Pavel Zeman who was serving as an accountant at a local Austro-Hungarian headquarters. The text, written on a small piece of hard paper, encapsulates with striking efficiency all the common themes of wartime family correspondence – love, affection, anxiety, agony of waiting, eagerness for news, solidarity both emotional and material, emotional dependence, as well as seemingly useless filler typical of middle-class correspondence of the time.

War correspondence has always served historians as a useful venue of understanding military conflict on the most personal level. It is especially valid in the case of the First World War which, if we paraphrase Paul Fussell's famous claim, is more or less the first "literate war".<sup>2</sup> For the first time in human history, with a possible exception of the American Civil War, there was a major conflict where most of the active participants all the way down to the ordinary men and women at the front and at home could regularly write and read. And they did – a lot. In Western and Central Europe, the war has brought the social practice of sustained regular correspondence down the social ladder and had successfully spread it among the general population. Mail, as almost exclusive means of communication between the frontline and the home front, became an ever-present feature of existence in all social groups. Everyone involved, especially the army command itself, fully realized the importance regular mail had for the morale of the troops, putting a considerable effort into ensuring its smooth operation.<sup>3</sup> "Write as often as you can"

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2 For Fussell defining the First World War as a "literary war", see Paul FUSSELL, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, New York 1977, pp. 157–158.

3 During the busiest days, the Austro-Hungarian army postal service forwarded more than nine million cards, letters, parcels, boxes, and all other imaginable items between the homefront and its more than five hundred field offices and two hundred base post offices. Although the army thought about curtailing this huge volume by introducing a postage for letters up to one hundred grams (which were free of charge), it never did so out of fear of a public backlash. See Frederick PATKA, *Auch das war die Feldpost. Episoden aus dem dienstlichen Alltag der k.u.k. Feldpost 1914–1918*, in: Joachim Gatterer – Walter Lukan (eds.), *Studien und Dokumente zur Österreichisch-Ungarischen Feldpost im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Wien 1989, pp. 332–334; also Paul HÖGER, *Das Post- und Telegraphenwesen im Weltkrieg*, in: *ibidem*, pp. 43–48. For an overview of the situation regarding POW correspondence, see Alon RACHAMIMOV, *POWs and the Great War. Captivity on the Eastern Front*, Oxford 2002, p. 135.

became perhaps the most oft-repeated phrase in soldiers’ letters home, while emotional dependence upon news became an endemic theme in their diaries and memoirs.<sup>4</sup>

With the introduction of “new military history” into western historical writing in 1970s, interest in individual testimony has been on the rise, with approaches to correspondence ranging from the *Alltagsgeschichte* through psychohistories all the way down to studying wartime loyalties. In the past several decades, the new trends took more or less firm roots in the writing about wartime societies of Austria-Hungary as well.<sup>5</sup> While correspondence has definitely become a topic in Czech historical writing in recent years, the First World War writings of Czech soldiers and their families seem to be relatively neglected. The few studies that had been published tend to be methodologically conservative, and while their authors acknowledge the immense potential of war correspondence, they mostly focus on summarizing its contents without posing any questions.<sup>6</sup> In an effort to alleviate this, the presented article using just a humble set of sources to begin with, aims at breaking potential paths that may be taken in studying Czech-written wartime correspondence in the future.

4 On the importance of mail in soldier’s life, see Michael ROPER, *The Secret Battle. Emotional Survival in the Great War*, Manchester 2009, pp. 5–6; or Richard HOLMES, *Acts of War. Behavior of Men in Battle*, New York 1982, pp. 88–89. For the specific example of Czech soldiers, see Jiří HUTEČKA, *Muži proti ohni. Motivace, morálka a mužnost českých vojáků Velké války 1914–1918*, Praha 2016, pp. 141–143.

5 For examples from Western Europe, see M. ROPER, *The Secret Battle*; Martha HANNA, *A Republic of Letters: The Epistolary Tradition in France during the World War I*, *The American Historical Review* 108, 2003, no. 5, pp. 1338–1361; or Klaus LATZEL, *Vom Kriegserlebnis zu Kriegserfahrung: Theoretische und methodische Überlegungen zur erfahrungsgeschichtlichen Untersuchung von Feldpostbriefen*, *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 56, 1997, pp. 1–30; Bernd ULRICH, *Die Augenzeugen: Deutsche Feldpostbriefe in Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit, 1914–1933*, Essen 1997. For Austria-Hungary, see Gerald LAMPRECHT, *Feldpost und Kriegserlebnis. Briefe als historisch-biographische Quelle*, Innsbruck 2001; also Bernd ULRICH, *Feldpostbriefe im Ersten Weltkrieg – Bedeutung und Zensur*, in: Peter Knoch (ed.), *Die Rekonstruktion des Kriegsalltags als Aufgabe der historischen Forschung und der Friedenserziehung*, Stuttgart 1989, pp. 40–83. For war correspondence being used to analyze the complicated problem of loyalties, see Péter HANÁK, *Die Volksmeinung während des letzten Kriegsjahres in Österreich-Ungarn*, in: Richard G. Plaschka – Karl-Heinz Mack (eds.), *Die Auflösung des Habsburgerreiches: Zusammenbruch und Neuorientierung im Donauraum*, Munich 1970, pp. 58–66; for an inspiring analysis of the specific case of POWs, see A. RACHAMIMOV, *POWs and the Great War*.

6 For a typical example, see Jana TEJKALOVÁ, *Haličská fronta očima českých vojáků rakousko-uherské armády*, *Historie a vojenství* 50, 2001, no. 2, pp. 332–370. David Pazdera criticized this approach in his own study, calling for correspondence to be seen not as a source of *objective* information, but as a venue towards possibility to reconstruct “*subjective perceptions*”. While he is indeed right in his appeals, his effort is rather limited in scope as he ignores most existing secondary literature, and ends up summarizing key themes only from the point of view of studying everyday life of the soldiers. See David PAZDERA, *Korespondence jako jeden z pramenů pro výzkum každodennosti českých vojáků rakousko-uherské armády ve Velké válce*, *Historie a vojenství* 52, 2003, no. 1, pp. 37–43.

The primary goal of this article is to follow the manifold themes present in wartime correspondence and to present the reader with a case study of two Moravian couples and their communication, looking for deeper structures permeating the seemingly straightforward language of wife and husband correspondence between 1914 and 1918, and the way they reflect the shifts in wartime gender structures and identities. Specifically, we will analyze two intertwined levels of communication present in wartime correspondence. First, we will focus on *communication strategies* implemented by the participants. Of course, correspondence was primarily a method of *communicating* – information, perceptions of reality, experiences, feelings, emotions. In studying correspondence or any communication for that matter, the well established methodological key is to ask – “*who is speaking, to whom, about what, and why now?*”<sup>7</sup> Of course, there are all sorts of imaginable combinations of “*epistolary dialogue*” in wartime, and, as we will see, the answer to these questions more or less decides the communication strategies in use, as these are closely related to the very purpose of the communication and its social background. In this text, we will deal with a communication between partners in marriage, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers discussing their everyday toils, joys, and worries. Focus on married couples inadvertently brings us to the second level of analysis – gender dynamics as apparent in the correspondence. Seen through the lens of gender history, a communication between the aforementioned social categories is not just a communication crossing the line between the home and the front, but also a dialogue between members of gendered social groups. Husband – wife, father – mother communication necessarily exists in a context of a prevalent gender order and as such can be seen as a communication between individual experiences of masculinity and femininity.<sup>8</sup> As a result, gender dynamics

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7 M. ROPER, *The Secret Battle*, p. 25.

8 For a background theory on gender, masculinity and femininity, see Jiří HUTEČKA – Radmila ŠVAŘÍČKOVÁ-SLABÁKOVÁ, *Od genderu k maskulinitám*, in: Radmila Švaříčková-Slabáková – Jitka Kohoutová – Radmila Pavličková – Jiří Hutečka et al., *Konstrukce maskulinní identity v minulosti a současnosti: Koncepty, metody, perspektivy*, Praha 2012, pp. 9–20; R. W. CONNELL, *Masculinities*, Berkeley 1995 (second edition 2005); Michael ROPER – John TOSH (eds.), *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800*, Oxford 1991; John TOSH, *What Should Historians Do with Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth-Century Britain*, *History Workshop Journal* 38, 1994, no. 1, pp. 179–202; Ute FREVERT, „*Mann und Weib, und Weib und Mann*“: *Geschlechter-Differenzen in der Moderne*, München 1995; John TOSH, *The Old Adam and the New Man: Emerging Themes in the History of English Masculinities, 1750–1850*, in: Tim Hitchcock – Michele Cohen (eds.), *English Masculinities, 1660–1800*, London 1999, pp. 217–238; Wolfgang SCHMALE, *Geschichte des Männlichkeit in Europa (1450–2000)*, Wien 2003; John TOSH, *Hegemonic Masculinity and the History of Gender*, in: Stefan Dudink – Karen Hagemann – John Tosh (eds.), *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History*, Manchester 2004, pp. 41–58; Martin DINGES (ed.), *Männer – Macht – Körper: Hegemoniale Männlichkeiten vom Mittelalter bis heute*, Frankfurt 2005; or Christopher E. FORTH, *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body*, London 2008.

necessarily underscores the communication of any wartime couple, putting it into an interesting social context. Using the words of the Austrian historian Christa Hämmerle, we can claim that wartime family correspondence is “*highly gendered*” out of sheer logic of the participating social structures.<sup>9</sup>

In Central European context, analyzing gender identity and its dynamics in wartime correspondence is not a new phenomenon, and this text fully admits taking inspiration from these earlier efforts. First Christa Hämmerle in 1997, then Benjamin Ziemann in 2003 took on the path to analyze the topic of gender in wartime letters, creating a referential framework for future study. Importantly, Christa Hämmerle did so using a rare collection of letters written by both sides of the dialogue of an upper-middle class Viennese couple. Similar theme, although more focused on specific representations of wartime masculinity, violence, and womanhood, can also be found in Dorothee Wierling’s study of letters written by a family of Berlin socialist intellectuals.<sup>10</sup> Both her and Christa Hämmerle’s work share the same trait – they have used collections where letters of two or more sides of the communication were preserved. These give us a unique opportunity to study not only communication strategies of the soldiers themselves, as soldiers’ letters home were those usually preserved, passed on, and later edited and published much more frequently than letters of wives, mothers, fathers or children. Collections that include them have many revealing qualities, including their ability to disclose the whole dynamics of communication in complex, intimate relationships over time. As Christa Hämmerle wrote regarding those few collections of “*men’s and women’s wartime correspondence*” that include both sides’ views, these “*reveal their mutual dependence and the interconnectedness of differing modes perception and experience*”.<sup>11</sup> According to Dorothee Wierling, they give us “*unique access to interpretations of the war and frameworks of meaning as they were exchanged and negotiated between the persons involved*”.<sup>12</sup> We could also add that they reveal

9 Christa HÄMMERLE, ‘You Let a Weeping Woman Call You Home?’ *Private Correspondences during the First World War in Austria and Germany*, in: Rebecca Earle (ed.), *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-writers, 1600–1945*, Aldershot 1999, p. 157.

10 See Christa HÄMMERLE, „... wirf ihnen alles hin und schau, daß du fort kommst.“ *Die Feldpost eines Paares in der Geschlechter(un)ordnung des Ersten Weltkriegs*, *Historische Anthropologie* 6, 1998, no. 3, pp. 431–458; Benjamin ZIEMANN, *Geschlechterbeziehungen in deutschen Feldpostbriefen des Ersten Weltkrieges*, in: Christa Hämmerle – Edith Saurer (eds.), *Briefskulturen und ihr Geschlecht: Zur Geschichte der privaten Korrespondenz vom 16. Jahrhundert bis heute*, Wien 2003, pp. 261–282; Dorothee WIERLING, *Imagining and Communicating Violence: The Correspondence of a Berlin Family, 1914–1918*, in: Christa Hämmerle – Oswald Überegger – Birgitta Bader-Zaar (eds.), *Gender and the First World War*, Oxford 2014, pp. 36–51. For an example from Western Europe, see Martha HANNA, *Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War*, Cambridge 2006.

11 Ch. HÄMMERLE, ‘You Let a Weeping Woman Call You Home?’, p. 157.

12 D. WIERLING, *Imagining and Communicating Violence*, p. 36.

partnership dynamics, values, and attitudes, filtered through specific communication strategies, all projected onto the fabric of pre-existing and ever changing social context. Using this logic, we will analyze two separate collections of sources, the Zeman letters being one of them.

Both of these collections, lucky finds in a regional museum and in private hands, respectively, are rather limited in scope, especially if we compare them with the collections used by Hämmerle or Wierling. The first one, already mentioned, is an incomplete collection of 109 *Feldpostkarte*, or field postcards, sent by Marie Zemanová to her husband, Pavel Zeman, over the span of seven months (January to July) of 1918. He was a headquarters clerk in Durazzo, Albania, far behind the lines; in a civilian life, a book-keeper living on a good address in the Moravian town of Olomouc.<sup>13</sup> She was a housewife turned businesswoman, taking care of a household consisting of herself and one child, their eight year old son, Milda (Miloslav). Even in 1918, she was still able to keep a staff of one housemaid. We have no more information than that, and no other letters have been preserved, although it is clear that there *were* more letters being written even during those seven months, but these were apparently lost. Even though the collection covers only one side of the communication, the wife's (which makes it rather unique), it enables us to ascertain many aspects of communicating practices. Also, the narrative it creates makes possible to try and reconstruct the dynamics of the communication as a whole. Of course, the details of Pavel Zeman's strategies, conversational tools, and figures remain hidden to us, and any interpretation in this regard will remain more or less educated guess.

The second collection, while even smaller in numbers (about 50 letters and postcards in total), is even more interesting, as it includes letters written by several members of a single family. First, there is Jan Čundrle, a teacher in his thirties (he was born in 1882) coming from a small Moravian town of Ivančice. He had served as a reserve NCO in the 14<sup>th</sup> Company, k.u.k. Infantry Regiment 93, before being captured by the Russian army on October 13, 1914, near Ivangorod. Subsequently, he spent rest of the war as a POW in a camp somewhere in European Russia, only to join the Czechoslovak Legion in July 1918 and return home in October 1920.<sup>14</sup> Then, we have Josefa Čundrlová, his wife, who took care of three small children (the youngest, Hanička, was born in January 1915; the

13 Other letters in the collection, sent from a family friend to Marie Zemanová, designate the address as Bäckergasse 11. See letter of Ladislav Crhák to Marie Zemanová, April 4, 1915, the Zeman Letters, VMO. As for the address of Pavel Zeman's HQ unit, all the postcards are addressed to a base post office in Durazzo with no further identification (Etappentrainwerkstätte – Etappenpostamt No. 191, Durazzo, Albanien).

14 See Jan Čundrle's record in the Military Historical Archives in Prague: URL: <<http://www.vuapraha.cz/soldier/11716976>> [accessed 1 June 2018].

other two were boys, Jiří and Ivan, in pre-school age) during the war and became a shop-assistant in Ivančice later in the war to make up for her missing husband's income. And, there are also their relatives – Jan's two sisters-in-law, and his brother.<sup>15</sup> While Jan is clearly the focus of the whole communication and all of the letters are either written by him or addressed to him, the fact that all the parties are more or less directly represented here, even though in an incomplete manner (as far as we can estimate, the collection represents roughly a fifth of the amount of correspondence exchanged, with whole sections missing), makes for an excellent source in our effort to analyze the ways war has shaped family relationships, communication strategies, and gender order in wartime Moravia.

As already mentioned at the beginning, the above-quoted card written by Marie Zemanová to her husband, Pavel, represents a sort of an ideal type of wartime correspondence with respect to the themes involved. If we compare both collections, majority of them is almost ever-present in both of them. Of course, it is possible to plausibly argue that many of these themes are not a product of the context as much as a consequence of culturally ingrained communication strategies typical for early 20<sup>th</sup> century European middle classes, learned through the education and internalized as a universal notion of what a written communication is, how is it structured, and what literary templates and patterns are to be used in it.<sup>16</sup> For this, the cards written by Marie Zemanová present us with ample evidence, as she repeatedly overuses a small set of standardized phrases, sometimes turning her correspondence into a patchwork of patterns interspersed with some additional information. However, as Rebecca Earle notes in the introduction to the collection of essays on historical epistolary patterns, “*letters display the signs of the distinct environments in which they were conceived*”, meaning it is not only the culturally established forms, but also the specific context of place and time which gives letters their ultimate meaning.<sup>17</sup>

Undeniably, the way Marie Zemanová addresses and greets her husband (“*Dear daddy! Many heartfelt hugs and kisses from us!*”) is a culturally standardized epistolary form learned at school; however, even here it is possible to see the wartime context

15 The collection of Jan Čundrle Papers is currently in private possession of his descendants; the author holds a digital copy, and all the future references are to this digitalized version of the collection (hereafter cited only by the name of the correspondents and the date). My many thanks go to Doc. Ivan Čundrle, who allowed me to study and copy his grandfather's correspondence for this research.

16 For pre-war epistolary culture and its possible influence on wartime correspondence, see M. HANNA, *A Republic of Letters*, pp. 1343–1348. For a more general analysis, see Stephan ELSPAß, *Between Linguistic Creativity and Formulaic Restriction: Cross-linguistic Perspectives on Nineteenth-century Lower Class Writers' Private Letters*, in: Marina Dossena – Gabriella del Lungo-Camicciotti (eds.), *Letter Writing in Late Modern Europe*, Amsterdam – Philadelphia 2012, pp. 45–64.

17 R. EARLE (ed.), *Epistolary Selves*, p. 2.

causing a slight shift in the meaning. The same is true with other standardized phrases included in the card quoted above, like the perennial “*there is nothing new out here*”, or the reports on current weather situation. While they can be seen as *topoi* typical of middle-class epistolary communication in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it’s the wartime context and the radically different situation of the parties involved that suddenly gives these “filler phrases” different meaning.

On top of that, looking at the same card again, we can see sections that only make sense in the context of modern society at war and it would be nigh impossible to find them in pre-war communication patterns. They include the repeated reference to wartime postal service and its regularity; or the very practice of everyday epistolary communication over long distances. Also, the ever-present anxiety connected to the lack of information, as well as large parts of the text dedicated to what we may call “material solidarity” (parcels and packages sent, received, or lost), are themes specific to the realities of a family divided by war. Indeed, these themes show clearly that it is necessary to read the whole letter *primarily* in the context of war, with the epistolary traditions of European middle-class being re-tooled for new purposes. Therefore, while we cannot forget that letter, as a literary form, is shaped by longtime cultural and social context, one which can be read as a text of a specific genre more than a reflection of reality, it is clear that it is not possible to detach this text from lived reality, at least in an analysis that focuses on the way these *forms* could be interpreted, i.e. given *meaning*, by the reader and the writer alike. As we will see, while the culturally-given form may stay the same, its meaning is actually dependent on communication strategies which can only be understood in historical context.

The purpose of every communication strategy is to pass information, opinions, and emotions in a way that fulfills the intentions of the writer. Before we get to the particular strategies used in this process, we cannot avoid mentioning the opposite practice, based on *not* passing information. Many historians dealing with the soldiers’ letters from the First World War had identified “discursive silence” as the main approach men chose in reporting their experiences to those at home, especially women.<sup>18</sup> In the context of our analysis, it is worth noting that this strategy was often highly gendered – while men were sincerely blunt and sometimes even graphic in their descriptions of war when communicating with other men, even may have indulged in some embellishment for the sake of their self-image from time to time, women, especially spouses, were treated to dangers or gruesome realities of modern warfare being played down or outright denied.<sup>19</sup>

18 See Ch. HÄMMERLE, ‘*You Let a Weeping Woman Call You Home?*’, p. 165; also D. WIERLING, *Imagining and Communicating Violence*, p. 42.

19 For more details, see Ida SCHIKORSKY, *Kommunikation über das Unberschreibbare. Beobachtungen zum Sprachstil von Kriegsbriefen*, *Wirkendes Wort. Deutsche Sprache und Literatur in Forschung*



We can definitely see hints of this strategy in our collections. Even though we only have indirect access to Pavel Zeman’s letters through the reactions of his wife, it is more than clear that he employed this method with regards to anything disturbing that happened around him, or even to himself. However, this approach was prone to backfiring as his wife had often been left to rumors and gossip, or, as in the case of his leg injury, he was forced to reveal the true reality after some time, which shocked her even more.<sup>20</sup> The same calming strategy of “denial through silence” is to be found in Jan Čundrle’s letters from Russian captivity, too. Of course, being a POW did not bring along as many dangers as frontline service, but the sometimes harsh conditions and general uncertainties still compare well with Pavel Zeman’s safe position in the rear of the Balkans front. Also, the situation was much more difficult in terms of communicating the experience because it often took several months for a letter or a postcard to make it to arrive. Later on, with the chaos of the Russian Civil War and him joining the Czechoslovak Legion in July 1918, even Jan Čundrle might have faced his share of dangers – but he does not mention them at all. Actually, he does not mention anything of interest going on. Even the very fact that he had joined the Legion happened more or less in the background.<sup>21</sup> In an effort to bridge this void, Jan repeatedly employs the simplest alternative to him being silent on surrounding realities – he tells his wife not to worry. As with Pavel Zeman, his efforts were prone to failure, as we can see in a letter to his sister-in-law: “*I got a card from Pepuška [„little Josefa“] from May 14, full of worries. I wrote to all of you many times, you don’t have to worry about me in any way.*”<sup>22</sup> It may have been the silence on the specifics of his situation that was putting his wife off again and again, but his never ending complaints and pleas for more money and supplies (see below) had probably a lot to do with undermining his own effort in this area.

Of course, when analyzing soldiers’ communication strategies, we have to take into account wartime censorship and the fact that everyone involved was very well aware of the fact that their correspondence may have many unintended readers.<sup>23</sup> This knowledge

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und Lehre 42, 1992, no. 2, pp. 300–301; also M. ROPER, *The Secret Battle*, pp. 59–61; for a short overview regarding Czech soldiers in the Austro-Hungarian Service, see J. HUTEČKA, *Muži proti ohni*, pp. 147–149.

20 See Marie Zemanová to Pavel Zeman, 28 June 1918.

21 He never mentions the legion in his letters home, and his wife actually wrote to him on 10 June 1919, “*I know you have joined the Legion,*” assuming he never shared that information directly (fear of censorship being a valid reason only before the end of 1918, when he has learned that the war was over and Austria-Hungary dissolved). See Josefa Čundrlová to Jan Čundrle, 10 June 1919.

22 Jan Čundrle to Božena Šrotová, 7 July 1917.

23 On wartime censorship in Austria-Hungary, see Gustav SPANN, *Zensur in Österreich während des 1. Welt Krieges 1914–1918*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Vienna 1972; on the specifics regarding POWs in Russia, see A. RACHAMIMOV, *POWs and the Great War*, pp. 135–160.

may have been an important factor in the men's silence on controversial topics including – conveniently – danger. In our collections, this awareness is actually apparent in many instances. Jan Čundrle made little distinction between his female and male readers, keeping silent with respect to many controversial areas, which may be evidence of him being well aware of the fact that his letters will be passing through the hands of both Russian *and* Austrian censor. His wife was aware of this as well, at least to a certain extent, and it made her all the more wary about his “discursive silence” strategy: “*I would like to know more about you so much,*” wrote Josefa Čundrlová to her husband in early 1915, “*whether you're suffering a lot or not. Because people around here say that you must write only the good things.*”<sup>24</sup>

Fear of censorship could influence the way women wrote their letters, too, albeit in a more indirect way. Marie Zemanová, while not very subtle when dealing with the sensitive topic of a black market tobacco operation she and her husband ran during 1918, puts a lot of effort into hiding the true nature of the “goods” under a simple abbreviation of “t...”. While she freely discusses other merchandise her husband sent home (rice, lemons, olive oil, and other luxury food, as well as caraway and other spices), even mentioning its black market re-sale value, with tobacco she is much more cautious, perhaps because of the doubly illegal nature of the whole enterprise – producing and selling tobacco was a long-established state monopoly in Austria-Hungary.<sup>25</sup> Even though censorship of outgoing correspondence was patchy at best, mostly because of its sheer volume, it is clear she was definitely aware of the dangers and tried to hide (with little subtlety, though) the part of her communications that she found most legally offending.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, she is prone to outbursts of anti-war rhetoric from time to time: “*To hell with the whole war!*” and “*This whole war is a devil's deed!*” are her favorite phrases in such moments, betraying the rather low limits of self-censorship in her correspondence.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, it seems that while self-censorship may have played a role in soldiers' communication with home, the writers at home – while aware of the existence of censorship – felt less

24 Josefa Čundrlová to Jan Čundrle, not dated, probably January or February 1915. Emphasis original.

25 In a postcard written on 30 June 1918, she actually mentions the possibility of a “renewed censorship” of soldiers' mail, adding that “*you won't be able to send any more t... then, won't you?*” See Marie Zemanová to Pavel Zeman, 30 April 1918. The state monopoly on cultivation and sale of tobacco (called *k.k. Tabakregie*) was introduced by Joseph II in 1784. See Ernst TROST, *Zur allgemeinen Erleichterung... Kultur- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte des Tabaks in Österreichs*, Wien 1984; in Czech, see Marie MACKOVÁ, *To byla c. k. trafika*, Praha 2010; or (with specific attention given to the First World War) Marie MACKOVÁ, *Limity tabák v rakouském státním tabákovém monopolu*, *Theatrum Historiae* 2007, no. 2, pp. 275-290.

26 On censorship of outgoing mail (limited to certain strategic areas, mostly industrial, or those close to the frontlines), see G. SPANN, *Zensur in Österreich*, pp. 113–115.

27 See Marie Zemanová to Pavel Zeman, 3 April, 8 June and 28 June 1918.

constricted. The contents of their writings were therefore dictated mostly by the needs of the communication itself. With them, any discursive strategies involving denial, embellishment, or just plain silence about wartime reality were primarily a product of personal communication strategy vis-à-vis their spouse. Any fears of the censor’s office came only second after concerns for feelings and anxieties of the recipient and were, as with Marie Zemanová, reserved only to the offences they saw as particularly grave. As a result, the women’s strategies in our collections seem to be much more nuanced than those employed by their husbands.

It is in this context we need to interpret the phrase that is more or less central not only to the postcard quoted in the introduction, but to almost *every single postcard* Marie Zemanová sent to her husband during 1918. She reports that “*there is nothing new in here*” in 106 out of 109 existing postcards, almost always using this exact wording. It is clear that along with a small-talk regarding weather (“*We have a nice weather again.*”), it constitutes a cornerstone of her communication with her husband. On one level, it seems that it represents a typical culturally determined communication mode regularly used by an educated middle-class woman. However, the all-important context of wartime reality turned this “filler” into something much more substantial – a “standardized assurance” that constituted a core of what we may call a “calming strategy” permeating Marie’s communication, at least in 1918. It is worth considering how much of this effort is based on the official government propaganda with respect to the image and expected behavior of a good “*Frau im Kriege*”, “*conveyed by daily newspapers and magazines, in the public appeals*” and in other venues.<sup>28</sup> While it is impossible to completely disregard this notion, the whole context of Marie’s correspondence, her pragmatic and rather disillusioned attitude, and the fact the cards were written during the last year of the war, put its influence into doubt. Looking at the collection as a whole, it is perhaps more likely that it is a homefront variation of a *topos* that Christa Hämmerle and others often identify in soldiers’ letters. A *topos* that establishes the groundwork for the communication in the image of static normality connected to the familiar and idealized past realities. First, there is an effort to rhetorically surround oneself in normalcy by describing everyday wartime existence in the familiar terms of civilian life (which, on the homefront, is less apparent, but still present), and second, there is the tendency “*to orient [oneself] towards the normality of the pre-war period*” which remains “*the horizon of all their hopes and wishes*”.<sup>29</sup> Here, we can actually see Marie Zemanová employing this figure to ease her husband’s worries – the simple phrase “*there is nothing new in here*” inserted in every letter carries a notion

28 Ch. HÄMMERLE, ‘*You Let a Weeping Woman Call You Home?*’, p. 156.

29 Ibidem, p. 165; also I. SCHIKORSKY, *Kommunikation über das Unberschreibbare*, p. 301.

of a static world that has not changed since Pavel Zeman has seen it the last time; a world where everything is as it used to be; a world that is the anchor to his uncertain existence; a world where changes in weather, however slight or non-consequential to anything, are still worth mentioning as nothing more serious is apparently happening.

In comparison, Josefa Čundrlová employed a much more straightforward strategy of direct assurances combined with playing down difficulties, or highly embellishing the family's everyday life. For example, in March 1917, she wrote to her husband: "*As for us, we are well in every aspect of life.*"<sup>30</sup> However, even she had resorted to the use of the above-mentioned figure from time to time: "*You can be assured that we are as well as we used to be before the war.*"<sup>31</sup> The same strategy, using the idyllic images of pre-war life, is especially pronounced in her letter from early December 1917, with detailed description of Christmas preparations including a list of gifts to the children and "*a tree as we have always had*".<sup>32</sup> As the war progressed, however, one can see a growing level of frustration and sometimes irritation between the lines, with reality "slipping in" almost inadvertently. For example, on June 20, 1917, she wrote to her husband alluding to the things past yet again: "*It's all as it has always been here [...]. I did not need any loans so far [...]. We have no shortages here, not at all.*"<sup>33</sup> Only two weeks later, however, she briefly mentioned that the family situation is already rather tense, possibly undermining her intended strategy: "*Granma and grandad are helping us out a lot [...]. I hope they will continue to do so. Without them we'd be starving.*"<sup>34</sup>

The problem with such communication strategy was that it depended on the author being able to keep slip-ups like this to a minimum. Another limit to the "calming strategy" manifested itself clearly in Josefa's case – her in-laws represented alternative source of information and kept her husband informed of the many difficulties facing his family at home. Thus, Jan's sister-in-law Cyrila started her letter in a rather familiar way of de-escalating anxiety through a ritual reference to the past: "*Everything's as it was with us.*" But then, she continued: "*Only, your Pepa [Josefa] has had no maid for a few months now. We are afraid she will exhaust herself. She's got headaches often, too [...]*" To make things even worse, she then went on saying that "*typhus was widespread here, but now the danger is over*".<sup>35</sup> Later, Cyrila wrote to Jan that "*P[epa]'s kids were sick. Hanička had a fever from too much fruit, and she had to call a doctor to little Ivan, as he has perhaps eaten the fruit*

30 Josefa Čundrlová to Jan Čundrle, 9 March 1917.

31 Ibidem, 21 January 1917.

32 Ibidem, 9 December 1917.

33 Ibidem, 20 June 1917.

34 Ibidem, 7 August 1917.

35 Cyrila to Jan Čundrle, 23 March 1917.

as well. And Jurka's got the chickenpox. But now they're all alright.”<sup>36</sup> One can only imagine the effect this set of information had on Jan in the POW camp, but it is quite clear that, in the context of Jan Čundrlé's rather moody correspondence from Russian captivity (see below), Josefa Čundrlová tried to solve the problem of communicating family life to her husband by painting an idealized image of reality in her letters, difficult reality notwithstanding.

The indiscretion of relatives presents us with one of the many moments in both collections when the “calming strategies” crumble, often leading to a crisis in the couple's communication. However, it did not always have to be a chatty in-law who caused the problem. Another cause of tension apparent in both collections are the war stories, rumors and outright gossip always circulating among the population at home. Very often, these were of personal nature and included unverified, exaggerated, or completely false information on the spouse's well-being. There is an almost ideal example of the mechanics of such a rumor in the Zeman collection. It all begins with Marie's letter to Pavel written on June 30, 1918: “I ran into Natzler yesterday in the afternoon, and he asked me if it's true that you were gravely wounded! Is there any truth to it? Don't you dare to hide anything from me, and tell me everything!”<sup>37</sup> The sharp rebuke at the end shows that the rumor circulating in Marie's social circle in Olomouc had torpedoed any calming strategy Pavel Zeman might have been using at the time. The resulting doubt and uncertainty regarding her husband's health then got only deeper as the rumor escalated: “What is with your wound? Is it getting better?”, Marie asked the following day, not even waiting for any reaction to her original inquest. Adding another reproach and revealing the emotional price the husband's silence had cost her: “Why didn't you let me know that you have been wounded? When Natzler told me [later] that he has heard you're supposedly dead, I thought I was going to have a stroke! I've been crying the whole night!”<sup>38</sup> The whole crisis culminated the next day, as the rumor now reported that “you are said to have lost both legs”. More anger follows, a consequence of a wife's willingness to put faith in her husband's communication strategy being completely shattered: “Why did not you tell what had happened to you? It was all the more cruel to learn it from strangers, and everyone is telling me something different! I am really desperate now! Tell me what had happened!”<sup>39</sup>

It is also no accident that the above described crisis came around at the same time when the Zeman family communication experienced, according to Marie, one of the many “outages” in mail service, resulting in much slower circulation of any

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, 5 August 1917.

<sup>37</sup> Marie Zemanová to Pavel Zeman, 30 June 1918.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, 1 July 1918.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, 2 July 1918.

information whatsoever. Reliability of mail service was one of the key themes in wartime correspondence,<sup>40</sup> and frequency and the “effectiveness” of wartime rumors seemed to be closely tied to it. If the quantity of the communication suffered, its perceived quality was harmed as well, and the resulting void was filled by rumor and gossip. These were hard to verify or debunk, and the resulting uncertainty gave them even more credibility. Ironically, the “discursive silence” of many soldiers, be it intentional or not, made the situation even worse. There is telling a moment in the Čundrle family correspondence in June 1919, when Josefa wrote to her husband: “*In March, right before I have received your letter from last November, there were rumors around that you were wounded in the hand, and others saying that you have lost both your arms and your legs, too.*”<sup>41</sup> The long delays in correspondence between Czechoslovakia and the Legion in war-torn Russia meant that even an absurd gossip may have sounded plausible for a moment. It is an evidence of the ultimate fragility of the calming strategy, as it was based on a “suspense of disbelief” that quickly eroded in the face of delayed mail, reaching a point where the thirst for news overwhelmed their possible credibility.

Anxious waiting for news represents a typical pattern of wartime correspondence. As written by Marie Zemanová: “*I Can Hardly Wait to Hear.*” The emotional consequences of the waiting, leading to a devastating uncertainty, is well summarized in Josefa Čundrlová’s letter written in January 1915. She reacted to the news that Jan was alive and in captivity after all, after not hearing from him (or of him) for almost four months: “*I cried so much after your letters stopped coming in October [of 1914], I was picturing the worst possible things, but even such uncertainty, such terrible fears and worries, did not made me to think about the worst [...].*”<sup>42</sup> The letter confirms Christa Hämmerle’s claim that “*the many delays and interruptions of the postal service resulted in a feeling of insecurity that went much deeper and often led to conflict*” – and it was not only the insecurity in terms of worries for the partner’s well-being, but also uncertainty about his loyalty to the cause of common partnership itself: “*Had the other partner really written a letter? Did he or she truly write regularly every day, or perhaps only casually, in passing?*”<sup>43</sup> There were of course many delays caused by the ebb and flow of war, and even regular mail took some time to arrive – about ten days in the case of the Zemans and months in the case of the Čundrles. As a result, information got “stacked up”, dialogues went out of sync, and the insecurity about the other’s mailing efforts were constantly peeking in the background.

40 For a perfect example, see the card quoted at the beginning: “*No mail has arrived today. Are you getting mail from me alright? And the papers? Write as soon as you can to let me know you are back!*”

41 Josefa Čundrlová to Jan Čundrle, 10 June 1919.

42 Josefa Čundrlová to Jan Čundrle, letter not dated, probably from January 1915.

43 Ch. HÄMMERLE, “*You Let a Weeping Woman Call You Home?*”, p. 158.

The dynamics of the whole partnership could become very unstable as a consequence. This issue is present especially – and, considering the lengthy delays in their conversation, perhaps understandably – in the correspondence of Josefa and Jan Čundrle. Although both of them swear emphatically and repeatedly that they “*send four to five letters a month regularly*”, their faith in the other and in their relationship is again and again subject to repeated crisis of confidence.<sup>44</sup> “*Why do you write me so little,*” asks dejected Jan in February 1918. “*Just a few pathetic words from each of you would be enough, so I’d have a general picture, and you – nothing. Why?!*”<sup>45</sup> In a reaction to other similar outbursts, his wife has written before: “*You whine that we don’t write you enough – as for me, I write you every week either on Saturday after work, or on Sunday afternoon.*”<sup>46</sup> However, neither Josefa was immune to the pressures of insecurity and the crisis of confidence: “*Oh, my dear Jan,*” she wrote in March 1917, “*I have no word from you since November. Letters are coming once a week or even every other day from some of the guys in Omsk. I write to you every week [...]*”<sup>47</sup> The well-targeted complaint says a lot about her loss of confidence in husband’s loyalty to their relationship. Ironically, roles had changed just a week later, when Josefa wrote another letter in reaction to similar rebukes in Jan’s letter that has finally arrived in the meantime: “*Oh, our dearest daddy – you say that you have not got any news from us since July, and I write you every week.*”<sup>48</sup>

Another limit to the effectiveness of calming strategies came from the nature of information itself. The underlying purpose of communication strategies was, after all, to share information in such a way that was emotionally palatable for the recipient, and it is clear from both collections that calming strategies did not necessarily work only through denying information, but also through balancing it through proper language, timing and context. We have already seen this with the phrases and figures invoking the images of “positive normalcy” and of the past as its measure. We can ascribe the same general purpose to the “filler” in the shape of Marie Zemanová’s small-talk dictums. For example, if we look closely at the way she passes information on to her husband in Albania, we can see that often, right before or after she ensures him that “*there is nothing new in here*”, she adds a piece of information that suggests otherwise and hints at the difficulties of sustaining a middle-class home in a 1918 Moravian town. Besides the already mentioned anti-war outbursts, which usually follow either complaints about rising black-market

44 For other examples of similar assurances, see Jan Čundrle to Josefa Čundrlová, 7 August 1917; and Josefa Čundrlová to Jan Čundrle, 21 January 1917.

45 Jan Čundrle to Josefa Čundrlová, 16 February 1918.

46 Ibidem, 24 March 1916.

47 Ibidem, 5 March 1917.

48 Ibidem, 18 March 1917, emphasis original.

prices or dwindling rations received from the government, telling Pavel Zeman that things are far from the ideal, we see events being mentioned that are a bit at odds with the presented façade of temporal stillness: “*There is nothing new in here. It’s overcast again. There was a huge fire yesterday in Chválkovice, we watched it out of the window.*”<sup>49</sup> It seems obvious that Marie Zemanová tends to use the “calming phrases” as a sort of cover in revealing potentially disturbing information, hinting there is probably much more going on than is readily apparent. Sometimes, it happens almost inadvertently, like when she repeatedly apologizes for the quality of bread buns she sends to her husband with “*you have to forgive me, I have so many worries*” – with no specific worries mentioned in any of that week’s postcards, which are (besides general complaints about the war and slow mail) more or less filled with the pretense of a “positive normalcy”.<sup>50</sup>

Even more revealing contrast between a purposeful communication strategy at the forefront and the unspoken reality in the background is one of the threads winding through the whole series of Marie’s letters. Sometime in late March or early April 1918, she had apparently contracted an unspecified disease, which might have been a result of malnutrition or other dietary deficiency. However, in the postcards available (and there seem to be no breaks in the flow of correspondence during the spring of 1918), she always mentions her situation in retrospect (“*I’m not completely healthy yet.*”), perhaps when it is clear her condition would be hard not to report over a long period of time (“*The doctor in the hospital told me that it may take up to half a year till I’m cured! It is said to be a protracted illness! There is nothing new!*”)<sup>51</sup> And while during the following months Marie is apparently trying to avoid the topic of her illness as much as possible, so her husband will not get anxious, her condition gets bad enough to warrant a doctor’s request for hospitalization in early June, which she refuses and proudly reports to her husband that the treatment she has received instead is helping for the moment. Then, in subsequent weeks, she plays out the same pattern – announcing past bouts of illness or complaining about limitations it carries (by the physician’s order, she’s not allowed outside during June and July) throughout the rest of the summer, only to put a positive spin on the situation at the end of every letter by reporting she already feels better for the moment and “*there is nothing new in here.*”<sup>52</sup> Thus, her illness, however grave or at least difficult it is, is used to reinforce the intended calming effect, with the traditional calming phrases serving as a counterbalance to the information she feels bound to pass to her husband.

49 Marie Zemanová to Pavel Zeman, 12 June 1918. Chválkovice was a village north-east of Olomouc, today one of the city suburbs, about two miles from where the Zeman family apartment was located.

50 Ibidem, 9 June 1918.

51 Ibidem, 13 April 1918.

52 Ibidem, quotations from 1 and 2 June 1918.



The same method of sharing information in a way that gives the recipient a general idea of present hardships while trying to lessen the consequent worries is clearly present in the way Marie discusses another key area of wartime existence – homefront economy. Especially in the summer of 1918, she repeatedly mentions not only rising prices (a staple complaint of her previous letters), but general food shortages as well. However, almost always she adds that the family’s situation is far from critical: “Up here it’s really bad as far as food is concerned,” Marie wrote on May 30, “but you don’t have to worry about us, I’ll always get something, and we have t[obacco] to exchange.”<sup>53</sup> “It’s really bad here concerning food,” was the report three days later, “but we have plenty, you don’t have to worry. There is nothing new!”<sup>54</sup> Again, we see positive phrases serving to counterbalance whatever disturbing news Marie Zemanová felt obliged to tell her husband. On the other hand, it is clear from the context of her letters that the family was indeed far from starvation that crept through the streets of many Cisleithenian towns and cities in the last year of the war – with his wife defending her decision to keep a housemaid on the payroll in April 1918, Pavel Zeman could be content that there are still reserves in the family finances. Therefore, her complaints brought him news on a contextual more than on a personal level. Also, the difference in the economic situation of both families may be the very reason why Marie Zemanová’s calming strategy differed from that of that of Josefa Čundrlová.

In her case, the small-town middle-class teacher’s household of four, living off an unspecified job in a local store Josefa got during the war, had suffered much more under the wartime economy constraints than the bourgeoisie book-keeper’s two-member Zeman family with access to black market profits ever had. The family situation forced Josefa to try and calm her husband with especially pronounced emphasis on the notions of family idyll, economic stability, and pre-war normality, as already discussed. At the same time, she was trying to hide the family’s economic situation in particular from him as much as possible, with only the above-mentioned slip-ups by herself or her relatives suggesting otherwise.

Of course, images of wartime reality flashing between the lines did not go unnoticed by the men who were on the receiving end of this strategy. By the end of June 1918, Pavel Zeman was apparently at least a bit alarmed by his wife’s illness, pressuring her – in an ironical parallel to the same crisis of confidence she had before – into admitting that the situation is actually worse than he was being told: “You’re asking me, what’s going on with my illness! To be frank, it got worse. On Wednesday, I was in the hospital, I had an appointment for ultraviolet rays, but the doctor said I have to wait till I get better, saying

<sup>53</sup> Ibidem, 30 May 1918.

<sup>54</sup> Ibidem, 2 June 1918.

*it's not good to mix too many things together. There is nothing new out here!*"<sup>55</sup> As for Jan Čundrle, despite the occasional slip-ups and disclosing remarks of his wife and relatives, he seemed content in believing whatever information is passed to him (as long as he has at least some). However, his correspondence with his wife betrays another set of themes clearly reflecting another level of dynamics in a communication between partners. These themes, revolving around gender representations and dynamics, are, to a lesser extent, apparent in the Zeman family correspondence as well, and it would therefore be wrong to ignore them.

As Christa Hämmerle mentioned in her study of the Viennese bourgeois couple during the war, the social development during wartime has created a "contradictory female identity". Many a wife "*had become a more critical, independent and probably more self-confident*" while, at the same time, preserving all the hopes for "*the prospect of a 'fulfilling' marriage in accordance with traditional expectations*".<sup>56</sup> There is ample evidence for this claim in both out collections. For example, in June 1917, Josefa Čundrlová wrote with barely hidden pride: "*Everything is as usual with us. I manage the household as we have always had, perhaps even better.*"<sup>57</sup> Two years later, in a similar vein but with even more air of independence from economic as well as patriarchal power of her husband, she wrote: "*Over time, I got so used to doing everything by myself that I hardly know of anything that I would share with you. Actually, I can no longer imagine there is someone in the world who cares about me, about my children, about my issues.*"<sup>58</sup> In an example of a disclosing remark, her efforts to calm her husband through references to her newly established independence fall short, basically telling him that his presence as a breadwinner and family patriarch is not needed anymore (because she can do things "*perhaps even better*"). In this particular letter, all family matters are symbolically appropriated by the wife proud of her ability to take care of them. She even rhetorically appropriates the whole of the parenting, claiming the children to be "*hers*", assuming the masculine position at the head of the family.<sup>59</sup> However, what follows almost immediately after the second quotation is the following re-assurance: "*But there you are – our everything!*"<sup>60</sup> While in the first part, we have seen Josefa Čundrlová experiencing a shift in gender roles,

55 Ibidem, 15 July 1918.

56 Ch. HÄMMERLE, *You Let a Weeping Woman Call You Home?*, p. 175.

57 Josefa Čundrlová to Jan Čundrle, 20 June 1917.

58 Ibidem, 17 July 1919.

59 For family roles and masculinity in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, see for example . M. ROPER – J. TOSH (eds.), *Manful Assertions*; J. TOSH, *What Should Historians Do with Masculinity?*; John TOSH, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-class Home in Victorian England*, London 2007; or U. FREVERT, „*Mann und Weib, und Weib und Mann*“.

60 Josefa Čundrlová to Jan Čundrle, 17 July 1919. Emphasis original.

with this sentence, she somewhat re-establishes her femininity by re-emphasizing herself as a part of a whole, putting forward her emotionality (traditionally seen as feminine) again. Combined with Josefa's similar “emotional assurances” repeated throughout her correspondence (“*Only that you, my beloved Jan, you are so far away, oh so far away.*”)<sup>61</sup>, and her calming-strategy motivated efforts to present the family as living as close to normalcy as possible, it is clear that her situation indeed becomes contradictory – on the one hand, she is keeping alive the notion of female emotionality, dependence, and care; on the other hand, experiencing and expressing new feelings even by invoking traditionally masculine imagery of “strength”. Symptomatically, she puts this “strength” into a direct connection to the “feminine” part of her identity based on her loving feelings for her husband: „*I don't want to imagine that you are suffering as well, it would drain my strength.*”<sup>62</sup>

Similar pattern of a woman betraying, in terms of the gender order, traits socially defined as masculine, is also apparent in the field cards by Marie Zemanová. While there is no doubt that, at least in writing, she fulfills her feminine role of a middle-class wife and mother, using it as a part of her calming strategy, deeper gender dynamics is clearly at play here. Not only she often gives her husband advice on how to deal with a new commander (“*Even if he's not in a mood and is berating everyone, just stay silent and do what he says! And let me know how you get along with him!*”)<sup>63</sup> – this can be interpreted as still well inside the traditionally feminine field of interpersonal relations. Notably, throughout the whole series of letters written in 1918, it seems that Marie is the “brains” behind the family black market operation involving the import and re-sale of goods that were scarcely available to an urban family in Moravia, but plentiful to a headquarters clerk in Albania.<sup>64</sup> As far as we can tell from her side of the conversation, Pavel Zeman is relegated to the role of a supplier. While he clearly helps to support the family through his parcels in a substantial way, the whole business seems to be directed by his wife. While he has the key access to the goods, it is Marie who has all the necessary market knowledge. She has the grasp of the black market, how it works, what are the prices, where to find buyers, as well as what are the family's immediate needs. As a result, she is more or less directing her husband in their common effort to make it through the war

61 Ibidem, 24 June 1918. It would be difficult and probably meaningless to list all instances when Josefa Čundrlová expresses loving feelings to her husband, as it happens almost endemically throughout their correspondence. As an example, see: “*As always, we will be remembering our distant beloved daddy with an indescribable desire.*” Josefa Čundrlová to Jan Čundrle, 9 June 1917.

62 See ibidem, 7 August 1917.

63 Marie Zemanová to Pavel Zeman, 28 April 1918.

64 For a typical example, see the card written on 10 June 1918: “*I guess you could send the rice, if possible! I was asking around for the price of lard, and they say 1 kg raw fat for 50 Kor [koruna]. That would be worth exchanging!*” Ibidem.

with as little discomfort as possible.<sup>65</sup> In the process, Marie Zemanová becomes a highly confident businesswoman: “*I did not exchange the t... from you yet. You bet I will not be duped easily, that’s for sure!*”<sup>66</sup>

However, it is worth noting that while she establishes herself, at least rhetorically, as the leader of the common business venture, acquiring many masculine traits in the process (being decisive, possessing the knowledge, and being in power as a result), she is always – at least formally – informing her husband on whatever transaction is going on: “*I’ll let you know as soon as I’ll exchange it!*”<sup>67</sup> Her intention seems to be to keep the traditional gender order alive at least through formal acknowledgment of the notion that – even though he has little say in the whole process – it’s the man’s role to have the final say. With these efforts, the sense of “gender normality” was kept on a symbolic level – as she was informing her husband only *ex post*, and the decision had already been taken. As we see a similar pattern in the case of Josefa Čundrlová as well, it seems that men were bound to experience a radical repositioning of themselves in the gender order, with the power structure within their families radically changing. Because of wartime reality, men become mere executors of instructions given to them by their wives, as knowledge and skills necessary for the family well-being are increasingly found solely with the woman, who is slowly becoming aware of the fact. It is the same process the historian Rudolf Kučera described in his study of wartime working class in Bohemia – even though the workers’ families were still living in the same households. Logically, with families where husbands became separated by thousands of miles, the same dynamics was much more pronounced.<sup>68</sup> What the men distanced from their families experienced was a process in many ways opposite to the dynamics of the “contradictory” wartime femininity of their spouses. While they were still the male members of the family, fathers of the children, and legal husbands to their wives, and they were still at least formally acknowledged as such they faced gradual loss of any ability to exercise the traditional patriarchal role while

65 Ibidem. See for example the card written on 19 May 1918: “*Ask around if you couldn’t get black pepper, but on a cheap! We can make a fortune out of it!*” Or a card from 30 May 1918: “*As for food supplies, it is really bad around here, but you don’t have to worry about us, I’ll always get something, and we have t[obacco] to exchange!*” The fact that knowledge of the market became a sole dominion of the wife is clearly apparent in many of the cards. For example, 5 June 1918: “*Don’t buy that rice, it’s too expensive!*” Or 13 June 1918: “*I have sold the oil to the Vyměťals for 50 K. They were really happy! And don’t send the garlic, it costs 40 hal. [haler] a bulb over here! It wouldn’t be worth it.*”

66 Ibidem, 21 May 1918.

67 Ibidem.

68 Rudolf KUČERA, *Život na příděl: Válečná každodennost a politiky dělnické třídy v českých zemích 1914–1918*, Praha 2013 (for an English edition, see *Rationed Life. Science, Everyday Life, and Working-Class Politics in the Bohemian Lands 1914–1918*, Oxford 2016).

being pushed into a secondary, sometimes even subordinate and dependent position in their partnerships.

This is apparent in both of the cases analyzed here. First, at purely material level, both families were supporting their patriarchs with parcels of food and other goods (the Zeman's), or with money (both cases). In the case of the Zemans, this support was of course mutual and did not make Pavel obviously dependent, but it still played an important role in his existence and in his wife's correspondence. Partially thanks to their business venture that he supplied with luxury goods, Marie Zemanová was able to supply her husband with many basic as well as luxury items. For example, in May 1918, she had sent him “a loaf of bread, 2 pieces of sausages, 15 cigars, and 20 caramel sweets”, adding “a bread bun and 3 sausages” only four days later.<sup>69</sup> On July 19 she reports to Pavel that she has sent “2 parcels” and two weeks later, she adds “200 K [koruna] and 25 cigars”.<sup>70</sup> Pavel Zeman participated in this exchange, of course – in June, for example, he added “two boxes [... containing] beans, 4 lemons, blue packet of tobacco [...], a bottle of oil, 6 pieces of soap, 3 packets of cigarettes [...]” to his regular shipments of tobacco.<sup>71</sup> But by sheer count, it seems that most of the parcels (excluding the tobacco) travelled in the direction from Moravia to Albania. Economic dependence on the operation directed by his wife was even more clear when it came to money – a sentence “if you need money, let me know and I will send some” appears often in his wife's letters during the summer of the last year of the war. Moreover, it is clear from his wife's tracking of the parcels that he had to ask for this kind of support several times over. For a man of his age and social status, it had to be a new experience indeed, being financially supported by his wife and her business abilities.<sup>72</sup>

Jan Čundrle had apparently experienced a situation much worse not only in terms material well-being, but also with regards to consequent shifts in gender identity. To start with, he repeatedly ended up desperately pleading with his wife and several (female) relatives for financial support in his captivity: “I got a letter from Pepuška today, along with money – 8.50 rubles. I really need more, so please tell Pepuška to send more, if she can,” he wrote to his sister-in-law in July 1917.<sup>73</sup> Not a month went by and Jan repeated his plea: “I've got the money, 8 payments in total. If Pepuška can manage, please let her send more.”<sup>74</sup> Not only was Jan Čundrle entering a gender minefield of decidedly emasculating

69 She reports all this in a summary two weeks later. See Marie Zemanová to Pavel Zeman, 17 June 1918.

70 Ibidem, 19 July and 31 July 1918.

71 Ibidem, 13 June 1918.

72 See for example cards written by Marie Zemanová on 16 May, 5 June or 13 June 1918.

73 Jan Čundrle to Božena Šrotová, 17 July 1917.

74 Ibidem, 7 July 1917.

financial dependence – he was also, through his ignorance of realities at home, causing conflict. This conflict can be understood, somewhat paradoxically, as a consequence of Josefa's communication strategies resulting in Jan's inability to see how difficult is her predicament; however, even taking her various modes of calming strategies into consideration, it seems his understanding of the situation was quite low. As a consequence, we can see the partnership experience several crises accompanied by sharp repositioning of the gender roles. It is the moments when Josefa's reactions to his financial needs shift from offering all the available support to more or less open criticism of his unmanly attitude: "I'm sending you the money, 30 K every month. I hope it's enough. If you need more, let me know, I'd send more," she wrote in December 1916.<sup>75</sup> Then, in May 1917, Jan basically forced his wife to raise her efforts, leading Josefa to an irritated comment: "I will be sending 40 K after June 1. We will have to manage the loss. As long as you can live better [...]"<sup>76</sup> When Jan's pleas for further support, both direct and indirect, did not cease, and actually escalated into an unrealistic request for "a coat, waistcoat, trousers and 2 shirts with collars", Josefa wrote "I do not what to say" and went on describing the truth about the clothing situation back home (where all Jan's clothes were used up as a source of material for children's clothes).<sup>77</sup> Jan's increasingly unrealistic requests incited an even harsher backlash from his relatives: "Pepa [...] cannot send you more money [...]. I think you should earn some yourself," wrote his sister-in-law Cyrila, while his other sister-in-law, Božena, could barely conceal her exasperation with his pleas for clothes: "Get your hands on something out there!"<sup>78</sup> In the context of this conflict, even the innocuous question of Josefa's from February 1916 acquired a new meaning: "You never write what job you do; the others do so."<sup>79</sup> If we consider the gender dynamics at play here, it is more than clear that while the women involved are empowered and in control (i.e., acquiring some basic traits of masculinity), Jan Čundrle's masculinity is endangered by his wartime situation, pushing him into a role of passive, dependent family member – a role traditionally designated as feminine, a role potentially made worse by the fact that as a POW, he had lost almost any semblance of masculine status – independence, freedom of action, or any action at all – and he went on existing in a "liminal" state as far as wartime gender order was concerned.<sup>80</sup>

75 Josefa Čundrlová to Jan Čundrle, 27 December 1916.

76 Ibidem, 19 May 1917.

77 Jan Čundrle to Božena Šrotová, 7 August 1917; for Josefa's reaction, see Josefa Čundrlová to Jan Čundrle, 25 November 1917.

78 Cyrila to Jan Čundrle, 25 October 1917; Božena Šrotová to Jan Čundrle, 2 December 1917.

79 Josefa Čundrlová to Jan Čundrle, 22 February 1916.

80 For more context on the gendered liminality of the POW experience in Russia, and the need to compensate for the apparent emasculation of the POWs, see Alon RACHAMIMOV, *The Disruptive*

Soldiers’ masculinity was problematized not only by the pressures of wartime economies, but also in the important area of parenting. On the one hand, we witness in the correspondence the immense emotional pressure of “distant fatherhood” forced upon everyone involved, and the on-going importance of the father for the family. It is actually the one part of wartime reality that cuts through most of the calming strategies – it seems that while women apply all sorts of communication strategies limiting access of the men to disturbing information in such areas as economy, with regards to the children, they tend to be much more open, targeting men’s emotional attachment to the children more or less openly in an effort to keep the parent-child relationship as informed and heart-felt as possible, revealing their dependency on the help of the other parent in bringing up and disciplining the children in the process. Thus, Josefa Čundrlová repeatedly tells her husband in the spring of 1915 that his daughter Hana was born in January of that year, also mentioning what she probably thought of most when thinking about wartime distant fatherhood: “*I would like to know, if you will love her as much as you do the boys, even though you have not seen her yet,*” she wrote in March, 1916, adding a month later: “*What will Hanička say when she sees you? Her dad that she hasn’t seen yet?*”<sup>81</sup> The same worries stayed with Josefa throughout the war: “*The kids are growing up, not knowing their dad,*” she wrote in January, 1917. “*Hanička says ‘good night’ to her daddy every evening, and she even hasn’t seen him yet [...].*”<sup>82</sup> Notably, all the cards written by Marie Zemanová to her husband address him as “*Dear daddy!*” – a phrase which, while it could come off as banal in a different context, here it represents a decidedly ambivalent call out to the missing parent to keep his role in mind.<sup>83</sup> With some caution, we may conclude that while men were more or less easily replaced by women in the area of economy, it was much more difficult, perhaps impossible to replace them as fathers.

Besides being missed in purely emotional terms, men were much needed as authority figures in children’s upbringing as well. Wartime reality more or less denied them a chance to actively participate in this “venue” of masculinity,<sup>84</sup> but it was not for lack of trying

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*Comforts of Drag: (Trans)Gender Performances among Prisoners of War in Russia, 1914–1920*, American Historical Review 111, 2006, no. 2, pp. 368–372.

81 Josefa Čundrlová to Jan Čundrle, 6 March 1916; *ibidem*, 16 April 1918.

82 *Ibidem*, 17 January 1917.

83 We can discern the same intention in the oft-used communication strategy of ensuring men that they are still central to their children’s thoughts, even though it meant putting emotional strain on their husbands minds. See for example *ibidem*, 21 January 1917: “*Little Ivan is playing with a construction kit, and I’m writing to you, which makes him stop crying.*” Or Marie Zemanová to Pavel Zeman, 21 March 1918: “*When Milda woke up, he did not cry, but he did so in the evening, calling out for his daddy, saying he really misses you! We both miss you a lot!*”

84 For fatherhood and its position in early 20<sup>th</sup> century masculinity, see for example Jitka KOHOUTOVÁ, *Konstrukce otcovské identity v 19. století: aspekt otce-živitele v rodinách české intelektuální buržoazie*,

on the part of themselves or their spouses. It was here more than in any other field of familial relations where women tried hard to keep their husbands “on board”, obviously missing their help. Marie Zemanová never ceased to update her husband on their son, Milda, and his successes and failures at school, in German-language classes, and in the process of growing up in general. Even in his absence, she is still using her husband in the traditional masculine father-role of the ultimate authority figure, and tries to keep Pavel involved in disciplining Milda as well: “*You should write to Milda and tell him not to let me force him into studying so much, and to study by himself.*”<sup>85</sup> Josefa Čundrlová, too, uses every opportunity to mention the children to her husband, and actually meditates on the irreplaceable role the father has in the children’s upbringing: “*There’s hardly any discipline around. I’m just glad I’m able to take proper care of their bodies. Anyway, it will be your task in the future. Actually, it will be an educational and disciplinary task for both of us.*”<sup>86</sup>

The men themselves were loath to lose their prerogative to direct or at least influence their children’s upbringing, and their efforts can tell us a lot about the development of wartime masculinity. Using the example of the Čundrle family correspondence, we can identify a clear dynamics where Jan, notwithstanding the lack of information about the situation at home, repeatedly comments on his wife’s educational efforts (more than on anything else bar mail shortages and lack of money), with mixed success. While he seems to be obsessed with the moral qualities of his children’s upbringing, advising on them being “*left to enjoy the joys of childhood*”, as “*it is early to introduce them to the drudgery of life*”, and noting that musical education is a way to do so, his wife seems to be more preoccupied with the realities of feeding the children properly. It almost seems as his comments are a symbolic way to exercise at least some notion of patriarchal control and power over the family, therefore preserving his sense of masculinity. In the process, however, it is clear that because of the lack of information, most of his efforts are hopelessly out of touch with reality of the home front – such as when Jan Čundrle expresses doubts about his wife’s ability to take care of the children after being sent a family photograph in January 1917, only to provoke her exasperated, defensive answer: “*You also say we do not look good – it’s just an illusion, the photograph does not do us justice!*”<sup>87</sup>

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in: R. Švaříčková-Slabáková – J. Kohoutová – R. Pavlíčková – J. Hutečka et al., *Konstrukce maskulinní identity*, p. 175. See also Trev Lynn BROUGHTON – Helen ROGERS, *Gender and Fatherhood in the Nineteenth Century*, New York 2007 or J. TOSH, *A Man’s Place*, pp. 79–101.

85 Marie Zemanová to Pavel Zeman, 18 May 1918. She even makes Milda to write a letter to his father, which more than a loving child’s letter to his dad resembles a report to a headmaster, promising “*to behave and study*” so the father “*will be proud of me again*”. See Milda to Pavel Zeman, 3 May 1918.

86 Josefa Čundrlová to Jan Čundrle, 8 June 1917.

87 Jan Čundrle to Josefa Čundrlová, 18 August 1918 and 17 July 1917; Josefa Čundrlová to Jan Čundrle, 21 January 1917.



Here again emerges the same issue we have encountered before – an information gap resulting in a shift in the gender order. While men become more and more passive, receiving not only material support, but also instructions and news from or through their wives (who supply them with newspapers as well as with updates on social life), the women acquire control and power through almost exclusive access to the knowledge of the world, beginning with the economic reality and ending with politics.<sup>88</sup> While men still try, as we have seen, to act upon their traditional roles as much as possible over distance, and women are still dependent upon them emotionally as well as in the invaluable parenting role (where the dependence is mutual), and they still honor their patriarchal role by reporting to them all the important actions they take, the decision-making process shifts along the lines of societal knowledge, i.e. to the women, and the whole communication becomes a sort of a symbolic, formalized ritual, a calming communication strategy designed not only to keep semblance of normalcy to make the separation emotionally bearable, but also to mask the dynamic changes in the gender order. On the other hand, women gradually became more and more emboldened to reflect this shift in the correspondence. Thus, Marie Zemanová retorted to her husband’s effort to speed up the transfer of tobacco by using his comrades going on a leave as messengers: “*I really don’t get it. You were already cheated once, and you get cheated again,*” she almost berates him in a condescending way, putting his apparently uninformed judgment into doubt.<sup>89</sup>

Therefore, while women experience what Christa Hämmerle has called “contradictory female identity”, men had experienced perhaps even more serious gender reversal, presenting them with a shattered and partially “feminized” notion of their own masculinity. With some caution, we may even claim that in the process of losing direct touch with their families and resorting to the venue of correspondence, their communication strategy becomes, perhaps unconsciously, more emotional than would be preferred, closing the gap between the supposedly rational communications related to masculinity and the emotionality of feminine correspondence.<sup>90</sup> Jan Čundrle, in particular, is a great example of this process. As we have already seen he often succumbs to despair when writing home, especially in his oft-repeated pleas for a more intensive communication: “*Why, oh why do you write to me so little?*” he asked his wife in his perhaps most emotionally charged outburst in February 1918. “*Why?*”<sup>91</sup> It is clear that communication with home was one

88 Christa Hämmerle actually came to the same conclusion. See Ch. HÄMMERLE, *You Let a Weeping Woman Call You Home?*, pp. 162–171.

89 Marie Zemanová to Pavel Zeman, 9 June 1918.

90 For the letter as a form of communication culturally, especially in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, ascribed to women, see Carolyn STEEDMAN, *A Woman Writing a Letter*, in: R. Earle (ed.), *Epistolary Selves*, pp. 111–133.

91 Jan Čundrle to Josefa Čundrlová, 16 February 1918.

of the few beacons of hope and meaning in Jan Čundrle's life that brought him a sense of normality – that was indeed true for most of the soldiers of the First World War, or, rather, typical for any soldier anywhere at any time.<sup>92</sup> As a result, he became deeply emotionally dependent on it, projecting all his hidden worries, anxieties and fears onto it. And while his wife actually did everything possible in her strategy to make him feel better, difficult mail connection led him to despond and pessimism. He was desperately clinging to any news from home he could get – literally any news, as he was not necessarily seeking information, but re-assurance in terms of an emotional connection – that he is not forgotten, that his family is still emotionally attached to him. This symbolic meaning attached to his communication with home is all but clear throughout his communication – see for example his plea for “*a few pathetic words*”. Of course, the family, thousands of miles away and burdened with wartime reality, could not always readily provide such support. Resulting tensions were reflected in the reactions of his relatives, which actually betray a gendered discourse in their understanding of the whole situation.

Thus, at one moment, Josefa Čundrlová tactfully noted to her husband that she is often without any news for months, and she still stays patient: “*Our most dearest daddy, you say that you haven't received anything from us in a long time – I am also very sad, and very often, because there is no letter coming from you [...]*”<sup>93</sup> Even before that, she had to calm her husband: “*You say that we don't write enough [...] I often don't get anything from you for three months, too, and what can I do – I wait patiently. There is no use in whining [...]*”<sup>94</sup> Here, we are witnessing a sort of a reversal in gender coding in epistolary discourse. Man becomes emotionally dependent on mutual communication, seeking reassurances through shared emotions. As such, he becomes more feminine, his masculinity beleaguered by the crushing impotence to perform in many of its key areas (as already mentioned, the position of a POW made the situation even worse in this regard). Woman is the one who is rational, calm, and reassuring, acquiring traits traditionally reserved for masculinity. Furthermore, Jan's sister-in-law responded in a rather condescending way to his gradually more and more desperate pleas and complaints, saying: “*You are whining that we don't write. I write you every fortnight. It's just because the post is so slow. Be calm, even though you receive no mail.*”<sup>95</sup> The same reaction came from his other sister-in-law as well: “*You say that you're not receiving any news from us. We write you a lot, all of us.*

92 For the example of Czech soldiers in Austro-Hungarian army, see J. HUTEČKA, *Muži proti ohni*, pp. 138–141. For a more analysis, see Richard HOLMES, *Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle*, New York 1986, pp. 87–90.

93 Josefa Čundrlová to Jan Čundrle, 17 January 1917.

94 Ibidem, 13 May 1916.

95 Cyrila to Jan Čundrle, 26 March 1917.

*Pepa writes the most.*<sup>96</sup> Later, she adds a telling sidenote: “*Karel also complains that I don’t write him enough.*”<sup>97</sup>

Can we therefore assume that her husband, serving on the Italian front, was experiencing his separation from the family in similar terms, experiencing the same gender reversal? Of course, it is difficult to tell thanks to the minuscule nature of the source sample we have used here, and a final conclusion will have to be left for a further research that would cover a much wider spectrum of soldiers’ family correspondence. But it seems that at least in some cases, wartime realities led men to adopt a communications discourse, forms, and figures culturally attached to femininity – like heightened emotionality and a desire for frequent, reassuring communication, in order to “emotionally survive” their condition. While navigating the maze of wartime communication strategies we tried to analyze here, it seems that many men going to war in 1914 to 1918 came out with an experience parallel to that of their wives, only in reverse. And, as many historians have shown, women tried to keep to their traditional notions of femininity while their social and economic roles expanded for them for the time being (only to be mostly reversed post-war), men, at the same time, were gradually losing control and power while experiencing unprecedented levels of passivity and dependency. And while both themselves and their partners in communication tried hard, as we have seen, to keep the gender order as much intact as possible on a symbolic level, the reality had often betrayed their efforts. Possible exceptions such as parenting were too few and far between. We may as well argue that “the contradictory nature” should not be reserved just for the female wartime identity, as deeply contradictory tendencies seemed to permeate the whole gender order during the war years.

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96 Božena Šrotová to Jan Čundrle, 15 May 1916.

97 Ibidem, 26 June 1917.