

The Changes of (not merely) Practical Woman and Emancipation of a Hobby Magazine

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ABSTRACT

*The study is based on analysing *Praktická žena*, a popular women's magazine that was successful enough to survive the "times of transformation" on the Czechoslovak media market in the 1990s. It is focused on the relationship between the content of the magazine and the official ideology of the 1980s, defining women's role in the society of that time, women's everyday life problems and social changes after 1989. The text follows the development of *Praktická žena* as an ideologically controlled "life style" magazine of the socialist era to the hobby magazine of the present, and deals with the changing evaluating of DIY activities, such as home making of clothes and interior decoration, in the Czechoslovak society.*

KEY WORDS

Women's magazines – gender – 1980s – 1990s – Czechoslovakia – DIY

1. Introduction

This paper is based on analysing both textual and visual components of one of the most popular magazines focusing on the Czech women's audience in the last fifty years, *Praktická žena* ("Practical Woman", issued since 1950, in the year 2001 rebranded as *Praktická Moderní žena* /"Practical Modern Woman"/). The study intends to follow this magazine during the "transformation times" in the Czech (Czechoslovak) context from the end of the 1980s to the turn of the millennium in the hope to trace not only changes in the very specific segment of the press market, but also some kind of reflection of social changes of the time, shifts in proclaimed values related to women and reinterpreting gender roles especially.

Of course, critical reading of a women's magazine is not an innovative topic, and a lot of researches in this field have already been done, analysing women's magazines especially from the ideological point of view. Feminist critics have tended to emphasise the role of women's magazines in reinforcement of gender inequalities (e.g. McRobbie 1991), although in the run of time, ideology behind women's magazines started being seen in more and more complicated and discursive way, and thus for instance, changes in women's magazine market in Britain from the 1950s to the 1980s could have been focused as a kind of ideological negotiation of gender roles (Winship 1987). Women's magazines were also seen as a special sort of commercial product but at the same time as a cultural realm, where worth researching is not only the content of the magazine itself or its potential impact on its readers (focused before

e.g. by Hermes 1995), but emphasis could also be put on its producers and their activities (see especially Gough-Yates 2003). However, all those studies relate to the western pop-culture and to the magazines popular among readers in the western countries, but the same topic has not been studied much in the Czech context so far. This study would like to contribute to recognition of Czechoslovak women's magazines of the last decades as an interesting source for historical research.

The situation of women's magazines in Czechoslovakia in the era of state socialism was in many ways different from the situation in the West. Till the beginning of the 1990s, commercial aspects of magazine publishing were not as important as in free-market oriented societies, since the decision whether a magazine kept being published or not did not necessarily directly depend on its profit. Because of the state control over all the official media, it would be tempting to approach women's magazines only as an agent of social control that sets the officially approved ideals and reinforces sex roles. We will indeed see how the magazine in some of its sections reflected the state ideology in the matters of family and women's role in the society. But quite often, things are not that simple and clear (see also e.g. Demarest–Garner 1992: 359) and even at the time under the official ideological control, we can interpret the magazine as the field of social negotiation of a kind. Observing *Praktická žena* in the run of time, we can for example come to the conclusions, that what at first appeared as pure women's creativity let loose in home-knitting, sewing and other Do-it-yourself (hereafter DIY) activities can also be seen as something more or less forced by circumstances and in a way official, too; further, that the officially set demands on women's role can as well be interpreted as something generally accepted; or that what in the 1990s seemed as continuation of the magazine's old approaches – representing women as the absolute rulers of the household and sovereigns of the family who set up harmony and nice idyll – can surprisingly be considered as quite new yearning for at least symbolic significance, when in the public space the women's question got rid of all the importance that it had before at least on the level of official proclamations. Those are, in brief, the main topics that are going to be followed in detail on the following pages – just after the short introduction to the magazine *Praktická žena* and its publication history. Connections will be made to the conclusions of some research of the Czech gender studies, as well as the results of recent studies on the pop-culture of socialist Czechoslovakia. I do not intend to describe or interpret the magazine *Praktická žena* in its totality; I only intend to offer a possible way how to perceive some of its aspects in diachronic perspective.

2. The magazine

Praktická žena was not the only women's magazine existing in socialist Czechoslovakia, but it is one of the few that survived the transformation times of the 1990s and exists till these days, therefore it emerged to be both a suitable and interesting source to follow the times of transformation. It represents a continuous line of issues with the same periodicity (monthly) and at the same time its content in the whole concerned period stayed, perhaps rather surprisingly, in the main contours the same. Whereas the main presented topics of the magazine did not change, what did change

was the way *how* they were presented, hence comparing issues from different periods one can observe shifts in the discourse quite easily.

Before the year 1989 most Czech magazines for women, *Praktická žena* included, were produced by MONA, the publishing house of the reliable communist Czech Union of Women (Český svaz žen).¹ In the realm of this publishing house also the two perhaps most popular women's magazines of the time were produced, *Vlasta* and *Žena a móda* ("Woman and Fashion"). Among these women's magazines, the weekly *Vlasta* had the longest tradition (reaching even before the communist coup d'état in 1948) and in the concerned period this one stayed the closest to what could be considered as a lifestyle magazine of those days (for basic information see Knapík, 2011: 1022–1023, entry "Vlasta"). The monthly *Žena a móda* was the main Czech magazine focusing on fashion trends (Knapík, 2011: 1094–1095, entry "Žena a móda"; Hlaváčková 2007: 58) and bringing dressmaking patterns for home sewing. *Praktická žena* assisted with that task, being at first issued as a supplement of this magazine; as a separate title it has been published since the year 1968. *Praktická žena* concentrated mainly on knitted pieces of clothing. In Slovakia, the equivalent of *Žena a móda* was the magazine *Móda* ("Fashion") published by Živena, the publishing house of the Slovak Union of Women; the magazine *Eva*, "devoted to cultivating of the beauty of modern women", was issued by the Slovak Ministry of the Interior (Hlaváčková, 2007: 59). The Slovak magazine *Dorka*, published also by Živena, resembled *Praktická žena*, but compared to that before the year 1989 it presented more embroidery (probably due to the much stronger folk traditions of this handcraft in Slovakia).

All of these magazines were bringing topics that were considered to be "typically women's". On the pages of *Praktická žena* the most important among these topics was handwork – knitting in particular, besides crocheting, embroidery and some simple sewing; sporadically in the 1980s, then more and more frequently, also other unconventional – meaning not that broadly popular among the audience – techniques (weaving, making bobbin lace in the 1980s and partly 1990s, using various special hobby materials in the present). Also visual representation of handwork stays dominant among the other topics of the magazine in the course of time – pieces of craftwork are presented in large photographs and the voluminous manual supplement of each issue provides detailed instructions for their home-making.

Moreover, in the magazine, there were and still are regular sections devoted to cooking, maintaining household and its economy, gardening, family relationships and children's upbringing, health problems – especially women's and children', etc. Rather surprisingly, even editorial texts that aim to contact the audience, to build closer community of the magazine's readers and to involve them in making up the

¹ Czech Union of Women was a subordinated Czech organisation of the Czechoslovak Union of Women (Československý svaz žen), which founding was directed by the leading authorities of the Communist Party in 1965. The assigned tasks for the organisation were persuading women and agitating among them; the Union was supposed to explain the official decisions of the communist administration and to convince women for their implementations. At the time of "Prague Spring" the Union, for a short time, became a platform for attempts to solve real problems of women, but with the beginning of the 1970s these tendencies were discontinued (see Jechová, 2008: 89–91).

magazine's content can be found in current issues (oftentimes referring to the magazine's website and Facebook profile, where such communication takes place predominantly) as well as in those from the 1980s.²

The publishing house MONA overcame the development of suddenly uncontrolled media market after 1989; in the year 1992, it was for the first time bought by a foreign investor, the international media group VNU (Verenigde Nederlandse Uitgeverijen) became the absolute proprietor of the publishing house and started providing not only investments, but also know-how (the magazine underwent a facelift, for instance).³

Conceptualization of what I called "typically women's issues" in *Praktická žena* oscillates between a hobby and a lifestyle magazine, with the degree of emphasis changing over the years.

3. The 1980s

In the 1980s, there was *no* level of the magazine, where handwork as its main topic would have been interpreted as a hobby activity. What is provided to the readers is presented most importantly as *practical* (hence the title of the magazine). Comments on the presented jumpers and pullovers deal only with information about the used technique and material,⁴ and if an embroidered tablecloth or a doily is included in

² Nowadays, building closer relationship with the readers belongs to popular and effective marketing strategies. Editorial board in the 1980s on the other hand did not have to face any real competition in the market and did not depend on the number of sold copies, however, the readers' participation and their sending of hand-made models to the publishing house facilitated the editors' task to get new pieces of craftwork for each issue, at the same time building the community of the readers was probably considered as something that simply should have been done, as anything collective was preferred to individualistic matters. Nonetheless, as the magazine in the 1980s regarded itself as a kind of institution, the language employed for this kind of communication stayed more or less patronizing or even stand-offish. See for instance instructions for the readers' contributing to the magazine:

"Can I contribute to *Praktická žena*?' Such a question appears in your letters quite frequently [...] Our answer is: of course, but you have to respect certain rules. If you offer us your piece of handwork to be presented in the magazine, it must be 1. Made of materials available on our market [...] 2. Brand new, not used yet [...] 3. Original; it cannot be a copy of someone else's model [...] The completed contribution (photograph of the model and detailed instructions) are, according to current need, put in an issue and after that edited. From these facts it becomes self-evident, that we cannot send your models back by return of post, which is what you sometimes demand [...]" (PŽ, 1989/4: 23).

³ In 2002, the brand MONA became a part of the Finnish international media group Sanoma Oyj and the publishing house was after that rebranded as Sanoma Magazines Praha. And the last news says that it was sold again, this time to the publishing group Astrosat.

⁴ See for instance: "Recently, hundred per cent synthetic kinds of yarn made in Poland, labelled Viskolan or Chostilana, have become available on our market. [...] the facts that it is cheap and easy to maintain belong to appreciable advantages of the material. [...] Růžena Štropová designed three knitted T-shirts for children as a possible answer to the questions of our readers how to use this kind of yarn and what for" (PŽ, 1989/6: 12–13); or: "For little girls. Even a sportily jumper can be enriched with a touch of romanticism thanks to the tender jacquard knitted (or else embroidered) pattern" (PŽ, 1989/4: 15).

the issue, comments on it sometimes as if tried to justify even the occurrence of the – in fact not that much practical – item in the magazine:

“Traditions of folk embroidery

Showing how a Slovak folk embroidery motif can be used on a piece of craftwork, once again we get back to the matter of connecting traditions and our present time – if sensitively applied on a typical cloth material, an embroidery can refresh even a very new-fashioned and modern interior and make it more pleasant” (PŽ 1988/8: 2).

When in *Praktická žena* of the 1980s general reasons are given for handwork activities, although this happens only rarely, they are presented as a way to be dressed in an inventive way and at the same time on little costs.⁵ The process of actual making of the clothes (or home accessories) is never reflected as an activity that could bring delight or fulfilment on its own. That becomes apparent especially in comparison with the present discourse of the magazine, but from the point of view of the 1980s, there is nothing about that that should surprise us.

Even in the Czechoslovak context, there existed a tradition of discussing leisure time as the time with hedonistic features, i.e. time filled with such activities that are performed just because of the feeling of self-fulfilment, inner satisfaction with the activity, to relax and enjoy (Švigová, 1967: 68–72), nevertheless handwork was not supposed to fall into the realm of real leisure time activities. Considering handwork as a part of semi-leisure time (term adopted in the Czechoslovak sociology of leisure from theories of the French sociologist Joffre Dumazedier) was much more likely – semi-leisure time meant the time dedicated to activities that brought both joy and benefit, such as gardening or DIY activities (Franc and Knapík, 2013: 60). But according to the then most probable evaluation, it would have been only seen as a part of women’s so called “double burden” – a phrase that in the colloquial language expressed disproportion in the rate of time that men and women spend on housework and care of children in the conditions of almost full employment of Czechoslovak women.

In the Czech context of dealing with own recent history, DIY activities are generally considered to be a typical phenomenon for the Czechoslovak society of the 1970s and the 1980s. In their monograph on leisure time in the past regime era in Czechoslovakia, in the chapter devoted to DIY activities, Martin Franc and Jiří Knapík

⁵ Aesthetic qualities of the presented models do not usually become a topic of the texts accompanying the photographs of them, much more frequently it is highlighted, that the pieces of clothes are practical, universal (i. e. all-purposed and/or easy to combine with other items in the wardrobe), and also economical – because leftovers of yarn or textile materials can be used for making them: “In February, we will make a dress for all-day wearing, its loose design makes it a universal piece of clothing for slim as well as for well-rounded women” (PŽ, 1989/2: 22); “[...] you can easily combine each part of the ensemble like this with many other items of your wardrobe” (PŽ, 1989/4: 22); “Once again we get back to the theme of using rests of yarn, this time for making children’s clothes. Knitting colourful jumpers for children, we can make use even of the tiniest balls of wool that would be otherwise found useless” (PŽ, 1989/2: 19).

(2013: 443–458) explicitly excluded handwork out of DIY. The meaning of the Czech word *kutilství* (bricolage), helped them to argument this approach, as it really is of narrower meaning. According to their definition, DIY is home-making of household appliances or goods for household normally industrially produced, but lacking on the market. Home-made art is seen as a boundary case. However, I find it useful to consider handwork and DIY as gender-related but still in a way similar activities, as in my point of view there are many coincident features of DIY and home-making of clothes, and even if DIY was usually evaluated as a hobby, but handwork was not, the sources of both kinds of these activities and reasons for them were alike. When Franc and Knapík name reasons for DIY, they mention most importantly expansion of time off work after the shortening of working time and introduction of free Saturdays in 1968, besides the need to replace goods missing on the market,⁶ and a possibility to compensate alienation of labour in the process of hand-craft production, which should explain why DIY can be found in developing countries as well as in the developed societies. Among explanations of DIY other researchers name joy, caused by the fact that it is a creative activity with a potential to release inventiveness and creativeness that most Czechoslovak employees had to suppress at their regular work (Činátlová, 2010: 158; Činátl, 2010: 171–173), and also the possibility that it could serve as a way how to individualize oneself or how to make one's living space homely (Činátlová, 2010: 159).

It is important to keep in mind that on the socialist market not only completed products were missing, but oftentimes there was also a lack in suitable materials needed for DIY activities, including those activities that were planned to replace with their results the lack of ready-made goods. Thus creativity had to be multiplied, one was forced to be really inventive as far as suitable materials for DIY was concerned – the whole DIY culture was to a considerable extent culture of substitutes. Those conditions on the other hand led many people to special way of thinking about potential second-hand use of anything currently available (materials illegally obtainable at their workplace included): anything must not be wasted, everything can come in handy (see also Činátlová, 2010: 158–159).⁷

⁶ It could be perhaps useful to think about these DIY activities of the 1970s and 1980s in connection with certain economic and living standards that had to be achieved first. DIY does replace products lacking on the market, but not those of basic material necessities of life, but those with the significance of a better economic and social status – typical products of home-making were for instance pumpkins conserved as if pineapples, or the lawn-mower (connected with the culture of Czechoslovak weekend-houses) that is home-made with the use of the engine from an old washing-machine. Home sewing and knitting was also not that much a matter of being dressed anyhow, but the matter of being dressed relatively well. DIY activities of the 1970s and the 1980s were replacing mainly lack of goods suitable for consumerism in its socialist version.

⁷ Relating to such ways of thinking, Blanka Činátlová makes a remarkable reference to Levi Strauss and his evaluation of primitive “bricolage” cultures and reminds a symptomatic quotation from the opening passage of the manual for hobby DIY *Umělecké kutilství* (“Art DIY”): “After all, sometimes even the first glimpse at a piece of specifically formed material reveals the shape and contours of the future product. As if the material right forced us: Man, I am here. Make something pretty out of me! (Pavlů, Dušan: *Umělecké kutilství* / Praha: Merkur, 1972/, introductory – quoted according to Činátlová, 2010: 158).

Praktická žena of the 1980s proves reign of general Czechoslovak improvised “bricolage” in many aspects. It becomes evident especially while reading the regular section of the magazine *Burza rad a nápadů* (“Exchange market of advice and ideas”), where readers share their advice. Dealing with goods shortage is a frequent and recurring theme and one can sometimes easily feel the writer’s pride of the uniqueness of their idea:⁸

“As I find lengthy to cut out gingerbreads using paper patterns, very simply I made my own cutters. To make them, I used window sealing Kovotěs, which is sold in the ironmongery” (PŽ 1988/2: 23).

Knitted and crocheted clothes presented by *Praktická žena* matched the western fashion trends at least to a certain extent, as in the 1970s in the western fashion the cult of poverism brought admiration for everything hand-made. Ethnical and jersey knits, and knitted and crocheted garments became fashionable and popular (Hlaváčková, 2007: 54, 124). At the same time in the 1970s finally, “the style of dress came to be considered an expression of the free individual who wears just what he or she thinks right” (Hlaváčková, 2007: 36). On the other hand, thus encouraged home-making of clothes and creating individual styling in the West differed from the Czechoslovak home sewing and knitting a lot, as in Czechoslovakia of the 1970s or the 1980s there were not many other possibilities how to obtain fashionable outfits. The creativeness here was much more than fulfilment of inner needs enforced by the circumstances, and once again it was limited especially with the lack of accessories, such as fasteners, buckles, buttons or zips (Hlaváčková 2007: 63, 72).⁹

Both *Žena a móda* and *Praktická žena* as the Czech speaking fashion magazines provided “generally accurate reports of the conservative mainstream of world fashion shorn of avant-garde excesses” (Hlaváčková, 2007: 63), but e. g. in *Praktická žena*

DIY products of the time included those really absolutely unique and unexpected in the use of materials or employed techniques, but on the other hand, some instructions for already tested substitutes were broadly shared and recipes and instructions for them were even a common part of official media (hobby and/or lifestyle magazines and broadcast), e.g. how to conserve a pumpkin to taste (almost) like a pineapple was a piece of nationwide know-how.

⁸ Generally, one can learn here, how to replace unavailable goods with something else, or just how to save some money re-purposing old items, e. g. how broken baby’s pacifiers can be refurbished (PŽ 1989/2: 23); how to home-make a sponge for washing up (PŽ 1989/12: 23) or use old shirts as a ready lining for newly made pieces of clothes (PŽ 1988/2: 23) etc.

⁹ This difference is reflected also in the position of the West German magazine *Burda Moden* in the Czechoslovak context (it could occasionally be bought in specialized outlets with foreign periodicals or borrowed from some public libraries). In the western context, the magazine was “understood as aids to creativity associated with the main trends of the seventies stimulated by the attempt to solve the ecological and economic problems and the idea of ‘back to nature’” (Hlaváčková, 2007: 63). The great success of Aenne Burda as the publisher of the magazine was based on grasping the economic potential of women’s creativity and yearning for original, yet financially available outfits, whereas in domestic conditions of Czechoslovakia, the same magazine above all mirrored the luxury of the West and represented a direct access to the world fashion trends.

these were represented selectively and in a way indirectly or “mediated” – frequently not in the fashion photographs as the other models intended for home-making, but in stylized drawings by Marie Volná,¹⁰ headed such as “Motives of foreign fashion trends for the summer 1989” (PŽ, 1989/5: 10–11), and predominantly without paper patterns in the magazine’s supplements. As if the Czech women were allowed to peep into the western life-style, allowed to partially imitate it, but still with the borders firmly set and controlled. Nonetheless, even the existence of *Praktická žena* itself can be easily considered as an evidence of the official acceptance of the DIY culture and its substitute role in the lives of the Czechoslovak citizens in the times of “Normalization”.

It reveals something about the ambivalent relationship between the public and private sphere of the Czechoslovak society in the period. Although by the most of the citizens these were experienced, at least according to their recollections, as strictly separate, in detailed look this matter becomes more complicated.

Superficially observed, such a clear line between private and public can easily be seen in *Praktická žena*, too: the main content of the magazine aimed strictly at the realm of the private life of families – public life occurs almost exclusively in the magazine’s editorials and articles on the activities of the Czechoslovak Union of Women, as if the latter were shielding the other content of the magazine with the official ideology and all the rest was related to the private domain of household. On the other hand, we must not forget that the magazine as a whole was run by the Union of Women via their publishing house, and that the Union was an official authority bound with the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. The magazine was published with the aim, proclaimed even in the “official language” of the magazine, to facilitate the women’s role and the social tasks following from it, being a “practical advisor” of women of its era. But doing so, it was at the same time inevitably defining and confirming ideological patterns of what the “women’s role” in the time of late socialism meant and which demands on women arose from it. These demands were set not only in the “official” and “ideological” articles of the magazine but in its whole content, although certainly, in the first mentioned case they are easier recognizable.

In her remarkable research on the Czechoslovak TV broadcast and everyday life in the 1970s and the 1980s, Paulina Bren (2010: 162) develops conclusions on women’s role in the late socialism made by other scholars about the fact, that the family and household seemed to be an asylum from the official policy, where many people used their inventiveness, and where their desire to live in their own way might have come true (Havelková, 1993: 68). The more important was the family sphere, the higher evaluation of women, and the stronger image of women as the family caretakers (Havelková, 1999: 75). Bren’s point of view surprisingly interconnects this shift towards family, experienced in all strata of the Czechoslovak society, with the main stream of the state policies:

¹⁰ Marie Volná was a fashion designer of Ústav bytové a oděvní kultury (“The Institute of Interior and Fashion Culture”), that was set up in 1959 “to raise the aesthetic and art-craft values of consumer goods” (Hlaváčková, 2007: 78). She worked for *Žena a móda*, too.

“What is vital to understand is that this turn toward the domestic [...] was also an expression of the quiet life endorsed by the state as a cornerstone of party policy and normalization’s political culture. Traditional roles became a mode of resistance against the state, but they were simultaneously reinforced and encouraged by the state” (Bren, 2010: 174).¹¹

“Woman and Her Family” were the key concepts of the official propaganda since the beginning of the 1970s, embracing very traditional images of woman together with the images of the employed and therefore, *ex definitione*, automatically emancipated one. The images of Woman and Family were highlighted not only in relation to the planned pro-natalist policies, but also because, in the view of the official authorities, the figure of Woman could serve as a harmonizing agent between the private and public sphere. After the politically turbulent times of the late 1960s, full of singular “big” events, the regime desired for quiet and piece, dreaming that the history could have stopped (Činátl, 2010: 166–167). Woman, the Caretaker, employed and thus present in the public sphere, but without ambitions in politics, who exhausts her strength and capacities in little recurring jobs for household, seemed to be an ideal figure for such times. For their important social tasks, the regime wanted to have women prepared, taught, and this task was assigned to the Union of Women.¹² In *Praktická žena*, the leading members of the Union claim responsibility for such teaching as late as at the end of the 1980s, considering the magazine to be a suitable mean of such education.¹³

Praktická žena mirrors yearning for quiet and changeless harmony even at the end of the 1980s, at the time of “Perestroika”, officially organized reformation and

¹¹ Also other researches reflect that the domestic sphere was not free of the ideological pressures – being “in its main features defined by the negative pressures of the public sphere. It is not independent on the public time, but it *ex negativo* overtakes its nature (ČINÁTL, 2010: 171),” yet, Bren’s explicit connection of the expanded patterns of thinking and social behaving related to women, together with the official ideology is really inspiring.

¹² Already in 1971 when new pro-natalist policies were being prepared, Presidium of the Czechoslovak Communist Party was given a report recommending, that traditional images of woman and family should be highlighted, and pointing out that systematic “teaching” of women, and mothers especially, should be led by the Czechoslovak Union of Women (Informace pro Předsednictvo: Rozbor vývoje populace s návrhy opatření k jeho zlepšení, 11. February 1971, 19, 28, NAČR, ÚV KSČ, f. 02/1, sv. 2, a.j.2.; quoted according to Bren, 2010: 264).

¹³ “What should [...] the position and the mission of the Czechoslovak Union of Women be? In accordance with the policy of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, it shall support acceleration of the economic and social development of our society [...]. Using specific means, it shall convince broad stratum of women for those activities, provoke their creativity and strengthen their notion of their co-responsibility for the further development and the improvement of socialism. Also, it shall take part in creating family policies and purposefully contribute to solving crucial questions related to women’s position, their lives and the lives of their families” (Štafová, 1989: 25). See also the proclamation of Miroslava Němcová, the chair of the Central Committee of the Czech Union of Women: “Our [i.e. the Union’s] key interests belong to marital and responsible parenthood education. [...] Therefore, we endeavour to impact young women with higher efficiency. [...] Family education is crucial, thus we consider even more effective impacting women-mothers to be our main task” (Němcová M, 1988: 3).

restructuring of the Soviet political and economic system. Miroslava Němcová (1989: 3) admitted that changes were inevitable,¹⁴ however, “the harmonious socialist family” was in her text still pointed out as “one of the most important tasks” that “we, women” have, and at the end of her article, the author proclaims “the so needed harmony and piece” as the ultimate aim of the social development (Němcová M, 1989: 3).

Explaining the relations between general life style and official propaganda, as well as the regime’s “sought to domesticate the public realm” Paulina Bren (2010: 162) presents a metaphor of an imaginary kitchen that was “expanded so that it might encompass the socialist family writ large”. Such a kind of imagination, especially connected to the popular theme of environment and its pollution, can be easily found in *Praktická žena*, too: the space of the whole republic is often presented as a large household and women as its housekeepers whose task is to tidy it up and keep it clean:

“Life conditions do not include only trade, services or traffic, but also the environment, its cleanness and tidiness. Women first of all should be interested in those [...] Speaking in general, care of public greenery is to a large extent a monopole of women [...]” (Němcová B, 1987: 3).

And through keeping the public environment clean, women are supposed to harmonize the interpersonal relations:

“Cleanness and tidiness everywhere and in everything, even if they might seem as a tiny detail, they are matters we cannot make without. [...] In untidiness, quiet and harmony disappear, we are bad-tempered, nervous, our work results are suffering as well as our family, and the family members transmit reluctance and restlessness on, as if in a chain reaction” (Krčová, 1989: 3).

In the magazine, the women’s role is presented as bursting with tasks and duties. Motherhood is the main one, then care of children and other members of the family as well as running the household, including all the effort that has to be made to substitute what is missing on the market. But at the same time, women (except for the maternity leave) are automatically considered to be full-time employed; besides they are verbally spurred to be engaged in public life, however, it must be understood that only really timid ways of affecting public space are welcome – such as the above mentioned care of public greenery (and of course, one could always become a member of the Union of Women).

The inevitable conflicts of those roles in the texts of the Union’s authors are in the magazine generally admitted, but solutions of them are seen – in accordance with other communist authorities – in improvements and better accessibility of services that should take over some of the women’s tasks, for example nurseries, kinder-

¹⁴ “The world surrounding us is undergoing big changes. It is not possible to stay still. At our workplace, at the place of residence, on each and every level of our lives, each of us has to be heading to the great goals set by the socialist society for the future” (Němcová M, 1989: 3).

gartens, canteens, laundries etc.¹⁵ The readers are repeatedly reminded that it is the Union of Women that helps to improve these services. Yet, reality stayed far behind those proclamations.¹⁶ One of the texts in the magazine dealing with the conflicted roles reveals almost unconsciously that no advice could be given here. After the author of the text had counted all the women's roles and tasks, including being always neat and in a good mood, as well as being prepared to establish harmony at their work with a brought home-made cake, she concludes that it is right surprising that women can bear all of that.¹⁷ Finally, she asks a rhetorical question about how it is possible. The answer is unexpected, because, in fact, it is no answer. Instead of it, the text establishes new demands on women: to live up to the expectations that an ideal woman should be happy about her self-sacrifice, and that the best reward she can expect is the others would notice it:¹⁸

“In fact, it is simple, indeed. Woman can be tired, she can be dropping from exhaustion, but all the troubles fly away at the very moment when she can do somebody good, when she can help someone or give some advice. When she pleases somebody, when she improves somebody's mood even

¹⁵ The only thinkable help for households was the institutional, depersonalized one. Paid personal help was impossible, as it would have been perceived in the traditions of maids in bourgeois and aristocratic families as a typical example of exploitation (see Jechová, 2008: 125).

¹⁶ See reflection of the importance of services as well as of the problems related to the topic in *Praktická žena*: “Our state authorities, as well as the authorities of the Communist Party, systematically take heed of developing and improving market and services. Besides others, the 9th plenary session of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Union of Women, as well as the 9th plenary session of the Central Committee of the Czech Union of Women dealt with the problem. [...] It was pointed out that market and services are the field of creating life conditions, and right here the struggle of women's leisure time is being fought, the leisure time that could be devoted to their further self-education, political public activities and, in the first place, to the so needed up-bringing of children a youths. [...] [The roots of problems in the field of services] is in organizing them [...], which is isolated from the local needs. The managements of them are rampant, not flexible [...] materials and spare parts are lacking” (Kottas, 1989: 8).

¹⁷ Published as a contribution on the International Day of Women, the text by a long-time editor of women's magazines Marie Formáčková is partly stylized as written by men about women, expressing their admiration for all that women can manage: “My wife hasn't got any leisure time for herself. All the evening long she rushes in the kitchen, and even when she sits down to watch TV for a while she does it knitting or darning something, or preparing herself for tomorrow work. Our women colleagues at work? [...] They work as hard as we men do, but besides that, they can conjure such a nice idyll, which is not given to us men. For instance, they grow plants at the working place, or bring a home-made cake, and they are even fun when they don't have anything to trouble.” After this opening part the author continues: “We live in the demanding era. Demands are placed on women in all their roles. Woman is above all a mother. Woman is a worker. Woman is an agent in the society. [...] In sum, it is surprising that women can bear all that. Even if – on the top of that – they are supposed to be neat, smiling, nice and not tired” (Formáčková, 1988: 3).

¹⁸ The author's rhetorical stylization from the beginning of the text can be thus revealed as a mere comforter, bringing the promised admiration for women by men (still written by a woman for women readers).

by a tiny little bit. If somebody thanks for that, she becomes ten years younger” (Formáčková, 1988: 3).

Although the just quoted text must have sounded exaggerated even at the time of its creation, true is that the reward for all the battles fought by then women with the double burden of profession and housework was mainly symbolic, but on the other hand, these “symbolic rewards” might have been individually perceived as sufficient. There are researchers concluding that it was this managing unmanageable what could lead to “a sense of omnipotence in the women” and that “the logic ‘I’m a woman. I can manage everything’ was prevalent” (Hanáková, 1998).¹⁹

The very official voice of the magazine, that kept explicitly persuading the readers that discrepancies, if there were any, had to be overcome through the women’s strengths of will, had its place mainly in the editorials or the articles on the activities of the Union of Women. But besides it, in the magazine, there were also texts much closer to the life reality. Actually, at the end of the 1980s, everyday problems and conflicts connected with gender roles or family issues are reflected here to that extent, that it has not been outstripped on the pages of *Praktická žena* ever since. For instance in 1988, the series of popularization articles “Harmonická rodina” (“Harmonious Family”) were published, but in spite of the title, their author, psychologist and family therapist Tomáš Novák, kept focusing mainly on possible conflicts in off key families.²⁰ In one of the very first of those articles, difficulties of current women’s role are described with clear conclusion:

“Anytime in the past gender roles were defined more clearly, but in a way also more simply. It was not necessary, and it was not even possible, to harmonize tasks so very different” (Novák, 1988: 5).

¹⁹ “This often changed the power structure within families, as a significant part of the economic power and a decent ‘survival’ of the family was dependent on women. The basic saying describing the power situation in the classical Czech family of the time was: ‘man is the head of the family and woman is the neck who moves the head’. Many men underwent a severe demasculinization in the private sphere, and they were sometimes called the ‘underslippers’ (being under the control of the woman’s slipper). Nevertheless, in the public sphere although the forced emancipation put men and women on an equal level in the workplace, men were always presented as leaders and women as their helpers” (Hanáková, 1998).

²⁰ Each of the episodes of the series is devoted to a model conflict situation, the sources of the conflict and its possible solutions. Very probably, the choice of them was made according to their frequency in the praxis of a family therapist – the most of Novák’s texts deal with conflicts between partners (e. g. because of finances, because of the children’s education) and inter-generational conflicts (not only between parents and their children, but also towards the generation of the couple’s parents, – because of the lack of housing possibilities, at least at the beginning of the marriage, sharing the same household with one’s parents or parents-in-law was a very common experience of young women back then). The conflicts are admitted, of course, to show the ways how to avoid them, but on the other hand, they are presented rather openly, even if there certainly are firmly set limits to the kinds of discussed problems – all of them belong to the field of unpleasant and irritating difficulties threatening the family harmony, but none of them is of those life- or health- threatening ones, and the magazine also avoided any erotic problems in the partnership.

The author reveals his sympathy for the difficulties that women have to face, but he also seems to hint that many of these difficulties are caused because women burden themselves with exaggerated expectations about their possibilities and because they are not willing to give up the power of the absolute rulers of the household:

“Today’s emancipated woman wants to succeed in her job, but at the same time, she gives her best to manage her household. We can use a simplifying hyperbole, that she wants to be more successful than her grandfather used to be (because she is more educated) but still, she wants to make as much jam and as many sweaters as her grandmother. She wants her husband to help her in the household, but still she wants to have the upper hand and the main responsibility. She is not willing to sacrifice her mission – to create a home out of a flat and a harmonious family out of just a family – even for the benefit of her job and its demands” (Novák, 1988: 5).

The recipes for solving typical problems of women’s family life offered by Novák reveal his experience with the family therapy: men partners are included as the inevitable part of the solutions; generally speaking, he mainly recommends sharing tasks and cares in the family, and a partnership with open communication and balance of power. Although it is certainly not easy to estimate the author’s motivations, one of them might have been that *Praktická žena* offered space for what seemed important: popularization of some useful ideas in psychology that had just little space elsewhere. In the same year, the articles on the children’s developmental psychology were written for the magazine by perhaps the most famous Czech child psychologist Zdeněk Matějček, once again, with a lot of respect to specific children’s needs and providing practical advice how to avoid problems in upbringing.

This kind of “sincerity about problems” (or at least about some of them) towards the readers was to a certain extent allowed by the fact that in this part of periodicals market there was no competition, the magazine did not have to be careful not to disturb its readers – hence the editors were not obliged to attempt to define the readers’ dreams and to fulfil them. With the appearance of the competition at the beginning of the 1990s (but possibly also with the new foreign investor of the magazine since 1992), this changed quite substantially.

4. The 1990s

The political change after November 1989 was never mentioned on the pages of *Praktická žena*, the consequence of the facts that each issue of the monthly was prepared several months ahead, the magazine did never really follow the latest political news and even the mentioned events of the public life (such as the activity of the Union of Women, proclaimed progress in women’s issues in the Soviet Union or elsewhere in the states of the Soviet Bloc²¹) and texts celebrating official anniversaries (typically the Great October Socialist Revolution Day or birthdays of prominent figures of the history of communism) were not the reasons to read the magazine. Only in January

1990 the language of the official ideology silently disappeared from editorials, and was replaced by quoting Karel Čapek or commemorating Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk's anniversary (both figures bounded with the history of democracy in inter-war Czechoslovakia, and therefore in the previous period forbidden or at least problematic to be reminded).

The First Czechoslovak Republic slowly became the implicitly referenced golden age, however more often reminded not in historical terms, but vaguely as the "time of our great-grandmothers". In the 1990s, "the time of our grandmothers" could not play the role yet, being too compromised by the old regime era and not far enough to be unknown and therefore easily idealized. However, "the time of our great-grandmothers" was not strictly limited as far as its beginning is concerned. It could have been dated even deeper in the past, reaching to the second half of the 19th century – in the magazine texts, the canonical Czech author and one of the first women writers in the Czech literature, Božena Němcová (1820–1862), serves as the reference personality for that era.²² In the photographs, the nostalgic times of great-grandmothers are indicated by use of historical items (for example old photographs, a mortar and a pestle etc.) or at least old-style looking items – often Biedermeier-like china or cut glasses.

Although the patterns for handcraft activities stayed the most crucial part of the magazine, the way of presenting them to the audience gradually changed – the handmade items are newly accompanied by additional both visual and textual information in the presentational manners of life-style magazines, information that above all play the role of advertising the objects presented in the photographs and making them look attractive. The white background of the studio, in which models wearing the pieces of knitted fashion used to pose in the 1980s in not very natural, but the more convenient ways to present the jumpers (typically, leaned slightly backwards with their arms folded on their hips, waist, or behind their head), was more and more frequently replaced with scenes looking "like from real life".²³ These scenes were often not as suitable for presenting new sweaters as the old-fashioned photographs of the 1980s, they were however attractive in a new way. In arranging the objects and/or figures in the photographs, two newly set general tendencies can be progressively distinguished: firstly, the effort to make the scene look like a part of an idealized home-

²¹ For instance, socialist women of Nicaragua were the topic of the magazine's editorial in the Christmas issue in 1988.

²² Even if her life in reality was far from any idyll and her fulfilling the then-ideal of women's role was more than complicated, her name is almost mindlessly used as another label of the good old days, safely rid of any "proto-feminist reading" that in her case would be also possible. However, reasons for the choice of Němcová are quite clear. The first one: her name belongs to the canon of the Czech literature and therefore is well known. The second one: her most canonical book, the novel *Babička. Obrazy z venkovského života* (Granny. Scene from Country Life), deals with the topic of nice idyll and harmonizing conflicts in inter-personal relationships, and its narration is based on cyclic run of time; as we will see further, all these features became crucial for *Praktická žena* of the 1990s.

²³ Very probably, changes in the magazine's visual were at least partly caused by the new foreign owner of the magazine.

ly, warm, welcoming household (interiors with warm lighting; food and hot beverages on the table, frequently as if set for tea; young to middle-aged couples, alternatively plus their children, in relaxed interactions typical for family life), and secondly, the effort to anchor the scene in the season.

The general reflection of the category of time changed. The “big history” keeps being excluded from the pages of the magazine, but instead of almost total ignoring the fact that the time flows, typical for the Normalization (Činátl, 2010: 167–169), the magazine started strongly emphasizing cyclic run of time based on the rhythm of the changes in nature and – partly – on the liturgical cycle.²⁴ Scenes or still lifes presented in the photographs are situated to the month-period of the year in which the particular issue of the magazine is available; seasonal fruit and flowers are often set on the table, and at the same time, the identical ones become motives of embroideries or other hand-made decorations:

“The touch of the autumn. Still heated by the summer, and full of the memories of the holiday and perhaps even the voyages far away, we are glad to come back home again. The last fibres of sheet weavers’ webs are ballooning in the air of the Indian summer and our home becomes shaded by the autumnal, a little bit nostalgic fragrance of ripening. In the bowls on the table, the plums are turning sweet, the pears are turning golden and the apples red... and their rounded, well-known, yet not ordinary contours become motives of a lovely embroidery” (PŽ, 1995/9: 6).

It is not uncommon to present handwork and cooking as a way to strengthen the experience of the very moment in the run of seasons.²⁵

All this helped to build the new fictional world of the magazine, fully ruled by the phenomena of “family harmony”, “nice idyll of the household” or “warmness” of various items within the household. We had the possibility to see above, that nice idyll and family harmony were important categories for the Normalization times too, and that is why they can be considered a continuing tradition of the magazine. Yet, there was a change in their representation in the magazine, both textual and visual. Any reflection of the public sphere disappeared, since the beginning of the 1990s, the only space for the “nice idyll” is the household, which is often put in contrast with the “harshness” of the outer world:

²⁴ Reminding the two main family festivities based on the liturgical cycle, Eastern and Christmas, was present in the magazine even at the end of the 1980s, but then rid of all the religious meaning. Christmas was thus presented as a feast of winter and Eastern as a feast of spring, and although celebrating them could involve following “old traditions”, for *Praktická žena* it meant only the materialistic level of the matter – such as making a special kind of bakery or using decorations based on folk customs. This in fact did not change a lot after the political turn; only references to religion are not that carefully avoided any more.

²⁵ See for instance the recommendation for a tablecloth embroidered with sunflowers: “To savour summer properly, let’s transmit a bit of the fields, gardens and meadows right under the plates (PŽ, 1997/7: 19).”

“The feeling of nice idyll. Apparently, we like the moments best, when it has been tidied and cooked, everybody is at home in the mood for pleasant idling, reading, listening to some music... To feel fine, we need comfy clothes in the first place. Now before winter it should be warmer, so it can go with us outdoors or spend the weekends at the cottage with us.”

Woman is presented as the sovereign of the household universe, harmonizing all the family with knitted shawls, strawberry jam and embroidered tablecloth, while other family members in the editors' comments literally lose their subjectivity and become mere passive objects of woman's care.²⁶

Difficulties of everyday life stopped being reflected. Instead of it, the magazine started implying that family harmony was achievable *merely* through the handwork activities and cooking. That helped a lot with increasing the evaluation of the presented pieces of handwork. Paradoxically, the less objective necessity of the presented item, the more rationalizing in the additional text, that frequently deals with the topic of idyll. This can be noticed especially in the texts on embroidered tablecloths and various doilies, whose numbers in the magazine considerably increased in the 1990s. In the 1990s, a doily became a sign of the nice idyll, arousing the spirit of the time of our great-grandmothers and at the same time stability and safety of one's home. It becomes evident for example in the comment on a tablecloth from the early 1990s, which seems to be miraculously gifted with the powers to keep family safe in the turbulent times:

“The table always belonged among the most important equipment of the family household. At the table, the family ate, pleasures were discussed and all the family members met there. If only in our fast-moving times this symbol of ‘stability’ stayed valid” (PŽ, 1990/3: 2–3).

It is not difficult to interpret these statements as yearning for conservative values. The development of *Praktická žena* can be thus related to the broader development in the Czechoslovak society in the 1990s. Conservative tendencies in the field of gender in Czechoslovakia of the 1990s have been observed by other researchers. In everyday life, the women's position on the labour market got worse (nurseries and kindergarten became less available, women were facing higher segregation and precarization on the labour market, women's unemployment grew up, the salary difference between men and women increased as well) (Sokačová, 2009: 9). It was predominantly caused by the naïve, but oftentimes sincere belief that the free economy can finally solve any kinds of problems even in the social sphere, and by the aversion to everything that originated in the past regime era. Newly, also high rate of employed women was sometimes criticised, and of course, the symbolic evaluation of women that used to be a part of the official ideology completely disappeared, and no other

²⁶ Consult for example: “Our clothes express our individuality [...] To match your partner with your clothes save a while at the sewing machine for him, too!” (PŽ, 1997/7: 14).

general approach positively evaluating women's role replaced it.²⁷ Also, DIY culture lost its importance, the open market started bringing lurking goods and the limits for consumerism started being predominantly financial. From this point of view, the development on the pages of *Praktická žena*, which started evaluating women as sovereigns who had powers nearly to save the harmony of the universe with a doily, does not seem that surprising. In the reality of the double burden that had not been diminished, it can also be interpreted as an expression of possible women's dream about successful coping with everyday routine that without any "higher sense" can seem unbearable, yet reading ordinary life through the genre of idyll is what offers this transcendence both to the everyday life and to the handwork. We should not forget that we are still discussing handwork, activity that the readers in the 1990s in fact probably enjoyed (there was no objective need of it any more), but were perhaps not yet certain, whether they were allowed to enjoy it *just for fun*. In *Praktická žena*, the fact that handwork is in the time of free-market industrial production a mere hobby, which provides fun and/or joyful results to the fans of the activity, was admitted only at the beginning of the millennium.

With the increasing competition, *Praktická žena* had to become inclusive enough, keeping its old audience, but still inviting new one, and at the same time exclusive enough to fill the very specific niche. The magazine stopped making demands on its readers to be women "in the right way", leaving women's self-projection dreams to the other women's magazines and the editorial board tried to find its new position as a magazine for women's hobbies. Nowadays the magazine specializes in unusual handcraft techniques, but even knitting as the traditional topic in the history of *Praktická žena* is presented in this realm. See the comment "Warm up with knitting" in a recent issue:

"Do you love huge wool clews and thick knitting needles? The basket with unfinished handwork is magnetic in the leisure time. Relax and look forward to the result" (PŽ, 2013/10)

We can sum up the development of the magazine over the last 30 years with a simplifying hyperbole – according to the magazine's discourse, in the 1980s each "practical woman" used to knit to have something nice to wear for herself and her family, in the 1990s she knitted to save the order of the universe, today she can do it just for fun. And being occupied with it, she can even allow herself, for the first time in the magazine, to be even individualistically selfish and neglect, at least for a while, her family – see the letter of a reader chosen by the editorial board for reprinting:

"Dear editorial board, I didn't expect that I would launch into making the beautiful 'baked' tablecloth so soon. The guys had to find their meal in the freezer, since I threw myself to the work" (PŽ, 2013/5: 5).

²⁷ The public opinion in the 1990s in Czechoslovakia was anti-feminist, even liberal media took part in social hysteria about – merely hypothetical – feminism that could appear among women (See Sokačová 2009: 8; Wágnerová, 2009: 18–19).

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Reference

Note:

If I am referring to the texts in *Praktická žena* that are anonymous, I abbreviate the reference as PŽ, followed by the information about the year of publishing, and after the slash the number of the issue.

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