

***Miroslav Nožina, Jiří Šitler and Karel Kučera:
Royal Ties: King Norodom Sihanouk and the History of
Czech-Cambodian Relations***

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This book commemorates the state visit of King Norodom Sihanouk to the Czech Republic in September 2006. The King, who speaks Czech fluently, spent his childhood and youth in Prague. The principal author of the book, Dr Nožina, studied ethnology at the T. G. Masaryk University in Brno. He is a research worker at the Institute of International Relations in Prague, the author of three books on Southeast Asia, and the co-writer of scenarios for two documentary films on Cambodia. Dr. Šitler, a diplomat and historian, studied in Prague and at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. He is currently the Czech ambassador to Thailand, Cambodia, Burma and Laos. Mr. Kučera is a doctoral student of ethnology at the Charles University in Prague and specialises in social and ethnic relations in Indochina.

Royal Ties is a remarkable book, beautifully produced and profusely illustrated, worthy of the state visit it commemorates. It traces the troubled history of this small country in which there are a number of parallels with the troubled history of the Czech lands. Interwoven into this chronicle is a very human story of a prince who, mainly through the kindness and dedication of his teachers during his formative years, came to love Prague, the Czech countryside, its people, its language and its culture.

The book comprises ten chapters, all annotated with references. To that extent, it is a scholarly work, useful to other researchers working in the field of Czechoslovak- Cambodian affairs. One of the authors, Dr Šitler, was instrumental in gaining access to the archives of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the other end of the scale, the Communist Party newspaper *Rudé právo* is well represented in the list of references (pp. 177–187). An appendix lists the names and tenure of the Czechoslovak and Cambodian ambassadors and *chargés d'affaires* dating from 1957 (pp. 174–176). This could be the basis of an interesting study, tracing the careers and fate of the diplomats against a background of political change. I found the book to be politically neutral. Texts from the era of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic have not been expunged from the record, nor have President Zápotocký and President Novotný been airbrushed out of the illustrations.

The early chapters describe the activities of Christian missionaries from the Czech lands operating in Cambodia during the 17th and 18th centuries and of other Czech travellers in the 20th century. The country became a French protectorate from the end of the 19th century until 1953, when it gained full independence. Prince Sihanouk had been elected King of Cambodia in 1941 but abdicated in 1955 in favour of his father and became prime minister. The father died in 1960 and Sihanouk became head of state,

remaining in this role until 1970. Flamboyant and charismatic, Sihanouk adopted a policy of neutrality in foreign affairs, developed friendly relations with countries in the Soviet bloc, China and France and became estranged from the United States. Czechoslovakia and Cambodia established diplomatic relations in 1956, presaging an extensive programme of cultural exchanges: scholars specialising in oriental studies, art exhibitions and sports travelled to the other country, and Czechoslovak scholarships for Cambodian students were offered. Later, in 1956, Prince Sihanouk paid a state visit and was received by the then President of the Republic, Antonín Zápotocký.

Sihanouk paid a second state visit to Czechoslovakia in 1960 at the invitation of the then President of the Republic, Antonín Novotný. During the visit, Sihanouk said that though Cambodia was a kingdom, its head of state (himself) was elected by parliament, and therefore, it was virtually a republic and that he would draw on Czechoslovakia's experience, especially that of Slovakia (p. 73).

Sihanouk's son, Prince Sihamoni, was born in 1953. Initially, the boy went to a French school in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, but his father decided that he should study abroad and sought the help of President Novotný. Convinced that Czechoslovakia's education system was superior in developing civil and moral attitudes in young people, Sihanouk requested that his son be enrolled in a Prague primary school, where he would be taught alongside Czechoslovak children. The prince was less than nine years old when he arrived in Prague in 1962. Uprooted from a life of oriental privilege and not knowing one word of Czech, he was enrolled in the third form of a primary school in Prague. After only one term in the school, responding to the kindness and encouragement of the headmistress and the form teacher, the prince showed demonstrable progress in spoken and written Czech. In extra-curricular activities, ballet inspired him the most. The prince finished at the primary school in 1967 and subsequently continued his education at the Prague Academy of Performing Arts (AMU), where he studied dance, music and theatre. His thesis, „Utilising European Classical Dance in the Cambodian Dance Culture“, enabled him to graduate with distinction in 1975 (p. 132).

At about the same time, Sihanouk, the prince's father, was adjusting his political affiliations. As the Sino-Soviet rift deepened, Sihanouk gravitated towards China and suppressed extremist factions in Cambodia seeking to overthrow his government. Moreover, the world was divided politically by the Cold War, and a hot war was raging in neighbouring Vietnam. For a small country to maintain a neutralist policy in a region where the great powers confronted each other was to walk a political tightrope. In 1970, during Sihanouk's absence in France for a medical check-up, Lon Nol, a Cambodian army general backed by the United States, staged a *coup d'état*, later proclaiming the formation of a Khmer Republic. Under an agreement with the new government, American and South Vietnamese troops launched massive military operations on Cambodian territory. Virtually overnight, Sihanouk became a stateless exile.

Lon Nol became prime minister of the Khmer Republic in 1971, and then president in 1972. His regime was opposed by followers of the exiled

Sihanouk and by the communist Khmer Rouge, the two factions merging to form a united front. A civil war developed, and despite aid from the United States, Lon Nol's government fell in 1975. The country was renamed Kampuchea with Sihanouk as its head of state, but after only one year, he was deposed by the notorious Khmer Rouge, and he fled to North Korea.

In 1976, for reasons unclear to me, Sihanouk and his family returned to Phnom Penh. On arrival, soldiers of the Kmer Rouge seized Sihanoni's luggage. His books, his Czech school certificates and his collection of classical gramophone records were piled in a heap and burnt in front of him. The family were taken to the royal palace and held there under house arrest. Sihanoni was ordered to work in the rice fields and prevented from practising his profession in the theatre. In 1979, Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia and toppled the Khmer Rouge regime. The Chinese government arranged to fly Sihanouk and his family to Beijing, where Sihanoni spent six months as a Buddhist monk. From 1981, he lived in Paris and founded a school of dance there.

The demise of the Communist administration in Czechoslovakia in 1989 coincided with protracted political upheaval in Cambodia. When the conditions of the peace agreement between the warring factions were finally resolved in 1992, Sihanoni was chosen to be Cambodia's permanent representative at the United Nations. One year later, he was appointed Cambodian ambassador to UNESCO in Paris. In 2004, he became King of Cambodia.

During a visit to Prague in 2002, Sihanoni met the Czech painter Jaromír Skřivánek. In their conversation, Sihanoni recalled that his studies in Prague and his encounters with the Czech environment had left indelible marks on him. These marks were not only professional, artistic and intellectual but also emotional. Skřivánek wrote, „In comparison with other foreign students, Sihanoni's approach to Czech culture was truly exceptional. His command of the Czech language equals that of any native Czech. He loves Czech music, sings our folk songs, and I was moved to hear him say that his infatuation with the Czech environment equalled his warm relationship with his mother“ (p. 163, ref 192). Asked about his memories of his earlier stay, Sihanoni said, „...As I walked by the Mánes Bridge, I looked across to the other bank of the river, with the panoramic view of Hradčany Castle, the silhouettes of the spires, and the cathedral. The dramatically illuminated palaces, the darkened gardens, and the starry sky above... I have walked down there quite often, always reliving moments of enormous enchantment and happiness. My heart sings here. It is as though all my childhood desire for beauty came to fruition in these places. I have always had the urge to thank fate for my privilege to spend my youth here. This is a fairy tale that never ends. I have not seen the likes of this in Paris or anywhere else“ (p. 165, ref 193).

Sihanoni's reflections show that a country's culture can transcend the transient politics of the day, even though in Czechoslovakia, that day lasted for forty years. The King's abiding impressions of Czechoslovakia are about human warmth, about the way he was encouraged by teachers in the primary school and in the Academy, and about the spirituality of the country

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embodied in its language, its music, its architecture and the countryside. A cautionary lesson to be learnt from Sihamoni's experience is that in replacing one political system by another, care must be taken not to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

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