

Dr. Tomáš W. Pavlíček, PhD

Masaryk Institute and Archive of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague

Mountains in Mind. Expert Memory, Oral History, and the Transnational Circulation of Knowledge

The proposed project examines high-mountain expert knowledge that originated informally on the Polish-Czechoslovak border and later spread—often randomly—to third world countries. It highlights the dangers of fascination with simplistic narratives of successful conquerors and the fastest alpinists, narratives that can be as misleading as the risky pursuit of unprepared tourists in high-mountain environments. (Filipkowski 2022) Although the traditional system of conquering mountains has changed, the global history of alpinism shows that it long neglected both the risk-taking potential of expeditions and the need for nature conservation. Scholars' fascination with white spots on the Earth frequently failed to recognize their role in the colonial and violent appropriation of nature (Happel et al. 2024).

The aim of the project is to analyse how scientists reflect on the transformation of the Polish-Czechoslovak border—from a line dividing mountains and state politics into a border that unites through the exchange of knowledge (Surman and Pavlíček 2024). A key case is the 1972 Cotopaxi Expedition, when a Polish-Czech group produced the first geological map of Cotopaxi, the world's highest active volcano. The Cotopaxi 72 Expedition represents an exceptional example of transnational scientific cooperation (Zoubková and Krůta 2018). Originating in Slovakia, this expert group transferred its knowledge to third world countries, while the entangled collaboration of geologists, speleologists, alpinists, and ethnographers enabled broader transnational exchange (Krige 2019).

Thanks to the previous project “Czechoslovak-Polish Academic Networks”, the investigator interviewed more than 20 scientists from different disciplines about their bilateral cooperation (cf. <https://entanglements.ih-pan.edu.pl/cs/rozhovory-2/>). He conducted other interviews as a private researcher. The collected material does not yet offer a full analysis but instead

raises methodological questions, highlights the need for further archival and field research, and addresses the marginalisation of women in science and mountaineering expeditions.

After four years of work in Warsaw, Pavlíček returns to a Czechoslovak transnational perspective. As observed during the interviews, experts often foreground achievements at the first narrative level in order to demonstrate travel constraints and the limits of state interventions in nature (Dąbrowski 2020; Zückert 2022). This raises questions about what expedition members discussed around the “evening fire” to mask their apprehension of risk and to avoid repeating the mistakes of climbers who had perished.

Experts engaged in risky activities frequently experience cognitive dissonance. It can be hypothesised that they exchanged knowledge from previous expeditions to alleviate immediate stress. A similar pattern emerged during oral history sessions with physicians in Cieszyn/Český Těšín: when recalling a specific case (casus), they were able to describe an anonymous patient in detail. Likewise, geologists and alpinists, even after more than fifty years, can recount their expeditions with remarkable precision, including the geomorphology of terrain visited only once. This can be compared with the experience of one narrator, the geologist Bedřich Mlčoch:

„Já si to nepotřebuju psát!“ opáčil Bedřich. „Já si to pamatuju. Támhle ten veliký [vzorek] je ze Salitrů z prvního schodu v levým kaňonu. Bral jsem ho po obědě při naší druhý túře. A ten černej je z Yana Sacha těsně pod sněhem.“ Nakonec si Bedřich vzorky zabalil, ale ani tentokrát si k nim nic nenapsal. I po půl roce v Praze pořád věděl, kdy a kde každý z těch padesáti kamenů sebral. (Až na dno... Coto-paxi!, p. 92)

The mountains are a constant presence in experts’ minds. How might historians rethink their questioning? The narrative of “conquering” mountains and collaborating with mountain people in the High Tatras situates the history of alpinism within a global process of discovery, rescue, and knowledge circulation. This proposal advances a methodological intervention in oral history research by arguing that existing questioning strategies inadequately capture expert memory shaped by high-risk environments (Freund and Thomson 2011). Rather than treating mountains primarily as symbolic or national landscapes, it conceptualizes them as cognitive, environmental, and ethical training grounds that shape how experts remember, narrate, and evaluate past actions.

The project combines systematic archival research with oral history. Archives—held in academies, institutional collections, and private expedition records—reveal the formal organization of expeditions, state policies, scientific outputs, and official success narratives. Yet archival sources rarely show how experts assessed risk, reacted to failure, or circulated informal knowledge. Oral history complements archives by accessing experiential knowledge.

Interviews and travelogues often reproduce heroic narratives of first ascents, technological achievement, and conquest. These narratives are shaped not only by memory but by the interview framework itself: questions about achievement or institutional roles prompt narrators to foreground success, competence, and legitimacy. The project argues that such accounts obscure the epistemic core of mountain expertise: decision-making under uncertainty, embodied environmental knowledge, and ethical reflection on safety and nature conservation.

Drawing on interviews with geologists, alpinists, doctors, speleologists, and mountain rescue professionals connected to Czech and Slovak regions, the project distinguishes general autobiographical memory from expert memory. Expert memory is case-based, retains precise sensory detail, and preserves long-term environmental data. Interviewees recall weather, terrain morphology, rescue logistics, cultural encounters, and ecological change—even for expeditions decades past. These recollections show that oral history can provide empirically rich data for environmental history, the history of science, and the study of tourism and sport.

Dąbrowski, Piotr, ed. 2020. *Zaczęło się od Tatr. Historia i współczesność ochrony przyrody w Polsce*. Oficyna Wydawnicza Wierchy.

Filipkowski, Piotr, Adam Izdebski, and John Haldon, eds. 2022. *Perspectives on Public Policy in Societal-Environmental Crises. What the Future Needs from History*. Springer.

Freund, Alexander, and Alistair Thomson, eds. 2011. *Oral History and Photography*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Happel, Jörn, Melanie Hussinger, and Hajo Raupach, eds. 2024. *Expeditions in the Long Nineteenth Century. Discovering, Surveying, and Ordering*. Routledge.

Krige, John, ed. 2019. *How Knowledge Moves: Writing the Transnational History of Science and Technology*. The University of Chicago Press.

Surman, Jan, and Tomáš W. Pavlíček. 2024. "The Formal and the Informal in the History of Socialist Scholarly Interconnectedness in East Central Europe." *NTM Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Wissenschaften, Technik und Medizin* 32 (2): 137–66.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00048-024-00387-0>.

Zoubková, Gabriela, and Miroslav Krůta. 2018. *Až na dno Cotopaxi. Česká geologická služba*.

Zückert, Martin. 2022. "Strukturpolitik im Staatssozialismus. Ansätze und Grenzen regionaler Förderpolitik in den slowakischen Bergregionen (1948-1969)." *Westfälische Forschungen* 72:159–75.

Contact:

Dr. Tomáš W. Pavlíček, PhD

Masaryk Institute and Archive of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague

pavlicek@mua.cas.cz