

THE 6th ICPhS IN PRAGUE AND THE ORGANIZED LIFE OF PHONETICS

Pavel Šturm

Institute of Phonetics, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic
pavel.sturm@ff.cuni.cz

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the post-war efforts of phoneticians in Europe to facilitate the exchange of scientific knowledge in their field. It focuses on the organization of the 6th International Congress of Phonetic Sciences (ICPhS) in Prague in 1967, contextualizing it within the re-establishment of the tradition of phonetic congresses. The paper highlights the role of Bohuslav Hála, a prominent Czech phonetician of the time, in the planning and execution of the Prague congress, based on an analysis of his correspondence and other archival materials. Three areas of collaborative efforts are discussed: the development of the *Manual of Phonetics*, the organization of the phonetic congresses, and the hosting of smaller events (symposia) on specific phonetic topics.

Keywords: phonetic congresses, ICPhS, ISPhS, history of phonetics, Bohuslav Hála.

1. RE-ESTABLISHING THE SUSPENDED TRADITION OF PHONETIC CONGRESSES

The series of triennial meetings of phoneticians and related scientists, which had commenced in 1932, came to an abrupt halt with the outbreak of World War II. The last ICPhS before the war was held in Ghent in 1938. However, despite the challenges posed by the war, there was a persistent interest in continuing the congresses in the following decades. This paper will focus on the Czech efforts that culminated in the organization of the 6th ICPhS in Prague.

1.1. Hála–Kaiser correspondence (1948–1958)

Louise Kaiser is a renowned figure in the field of phonetics congresses. She pursued her studies in medicine at the University of Amsterdam and became the first female lecturer there. She played an instrumental role in establishing experimental phonetics in the Netherlands, particularly at her university [1]. Notably, she was one of the organizers of the inaugural ICPhS in 1932 in Amsterdam, and remained a member of the Permanent Council (PC) both before and after World War II. Additionally, she actively participated in the 1932, 1935, and 1938 congresses. Kaiser maintained extensive correspondence with Bohuslav Hála, a Czech phonetician who later

became the director of the Institute of Phonetics in Prague after the passing of Josef Chlumský [2]. Hála also participated in the 1938 congress, but he and Kaiser had already become acquainted in 1923 during Kaiser’s training in the Prague laboratory.

On 24/1/48, Hála informed Kaiser of his plans to tour phonetic laboratories in Holland, Belgium, and France, and expressed his intention to visit her in June. Kaiser responded positively, eager to hear Hála’s critique of her workplace. She also informed him about an upcoming “small phonetic congress” that was disguised as a section of the Int. Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, to be held in Brussels in August.

However, on 18/2/48, during the impending communist coup in Czechoslovakia, the Ministry of Education refused to fund Hála’s journey to Western laboratories. On 22/6/48, Hála wrote to Kaiser, informing her that it was possible he would attend the congress in Brussels instead, with the hope of visiting her and checking some of her instruments. Unable to obtain a visa to Holland in time, their interaction was limited to the event in Brussels. Apparently, it was decided there (and was one of the aims of the event) that phoneticians should meet more frequently, continuing the interrupted tradition of phonetic reunions.

On 16/2/53, Hála complains to Kaiser that five years have passed and still nothing. Kaiser’s answer is missing. At that time, she was busy preparing the *Manual of Phonetics* [3], a synthesis of various issues in phonetics, intended to be a continuation of the PC’s former activities. “The spirit of the book was to be international” [3: ix]. On 5/5/53, Hála received the contents of the book, along with his name indicated under one section, which left him confused, as he had no prior knowledge of it. Kaiser responded with apologies, regretting that the contact between them had been less frequent. Hála then agreed to participate as an author and submitted his contribution on the Slavic languages at the end of the year. Kaiser was exited.

On 30/9/54, Hála wrote to her: “already a long time has passed since the last Phonetics Congress in 1948 (to tell the truth, the last independent and universal Congress was that of 1938). Wouldn’t you find it [...] possible to think of organizing a new congress next year?” Kaiser replied on 5/10/54. She agreed the 1948 congress was “insufficient for lack of independence.” She explained that she had been trying to organize a congress similar to those held in the 1930s since the

end of the war, but had encountered little response. This was why she had focused her efforts on producing the *Manual*. “Nevertheless, it would be worth to try anew to establish a congress.” She promised she would discuss the matter with the PC if Hála came up with a plan of his own.

On 24/10/54, Hála responded with these propositions: determining the worldwide interest in the congress, considering moving the congress to 1956 if 1955 is too soon, and suggesting Milan as the possible location. Subsequent correspondence concerned the *Manual* again. However, a year later (23/9/55), Hála returned to the urgent question of the congress and proposed Milan or Paris as potential locations. Kaiser replied on 17/11/55, excusing the delay by not being able to help with the congress anyway. While she agreed with Hála that a new congress would be useful, she remained sceptical about its possibility based on her bad experience in Brussels. “Nevertheless, if someone succeeds in organizing a new congress, I would be very happy.” Hála added a handwritten note to the letter: “Take care of it instead of Kaiser.”

In the letter from 2/5/56, Hála reminds Kaiser of her last words and asks for her opinion on organizing the next congress in Prague. Apparently, there have been other proposals as well, as a circular sent to PC members on 14/5/56 informs them of three possibilities: Helsinki 1958 (Sovijärvi), Coimbra 1957/58 (de Lacerda) and Prague (Hála). The members of the council were asked to vote.

In a reply from 23/5/56, Hála offers to leave the organization to whoever contacted the PC first. He personally advises Coimbra 1957. On 30/7/56, Hála receives an official invitation from Kaiser to become a member of the PC, which also includes information that the site and time have not yet been settled. In October 1956, Hála responds to Kaiser’s circular to PC members from 20/9/56, replying as follows: 1) he votes along with the majority for Coimbra in August 1958; 2) in exchange, he insists on excluding linguists from ICPhS, as they have their own congress, unless their contributions are phonetic in nature. On 30/10/56, Kaiser informs him that the decision about the congress has not yet been made. After several months, on 6/3/57, Kaiser informs Hála that she “might go to Coimbra in April this year to arrange the congress with M. de Lacerda.” On 6/5/57, Hála reminds her of this and asks if it has been settled. Impatient, he also writes directly to de Lacerda (see Section 1.2). Kaiser’s circular to PC members from 20/6/57 informs them that Coimbra is no longer an option because de Lacerda is mostly out of Portugal. The solution was to switch for Helsinki. However, on 29/6/57, Kaiser brings ill news: “difficulties are piling up around the 1958 Congress and I fear that the time left for the preparation will be too short.”

On 20/12/57, Hála responds to a PC circular, voting for Milan as the site of the next Congress so that Gemelli’s laboratory could be visited. However, as of 16/2/58, Hála has received no response or any news about the Italian congress and requires some information from Kaiser. There is no extant reply.

1.2. Hála–de Lacerda correspondence (1957)

On 26/5/57, Hála wrote to the Portuguese phonetician Armando de Lacerda: “For three years now I have been insisting with Madame Kaiser that a congress of phoneticians should be organized. At the beginning of this year, she informed me that she intended to go to Coimbra to discuss with you the conditions for a congress to be held in Coimbra. As Mrs. Kaiser has not until now answered my questions in relation to the congress and as, for certain reasons, I must know it to ensure my participation, from now on, I take the liberty of addressing you to ask for any details of your meeting with Madame Kaiser about the congress.” There is no reply either in Prague or in the Lacerda archive (Quintino Lopes, personal communication).

1.3. Hála–Gemelli correspondence (1958)

In a letter to Agostino Gemelli from 11/4/58, Hála inquires whether the Congress that was to take place in August 1958 in Milan is postponed to the next year. Hála adds that Kaiser informed him in her last letter (which we do not possess) that she was resigning from the PC; as a result, Hála is unsure about the Congress’ future. He believes that “a reunion of phoneticians, suspended since 1938, is of a great importance.”

Gemelli replied curtly on 16/4/58 that the phonetic congress would not be occurring. Instead, he offered Hála a programme for the 5th congress of the Italian Society of Exper. Phonetics, Biological Phonetics, Phoniatics and Audiology, scheduled for May 1958 in Milan. There is no evidence Hála attended the event.

1.4. Hála–Husson correspondence (1955–1959)

Another stock of correspondence is only indirectly relevant to our theme. Since at least 1951, Hála corresponded with the French physiologist and phoniatriest Raoul Husson. They admired each other’s work highly, leading for instance to Hála being elected “Président général adjoint du Haut-Collège” for his outstanding work on Czech vowels. Hála was invited to Paris several times but due to a variety of reasons he was able to come only as late as 1957 (between April 5 and 20). He delivered a lecture in front of the Société de Linguistique on April 6. In a letter to Husson from 12/5/57, Hála fondly reminisces about the good times they had in Paris and the hours they spent discussing topics of mutual interest.

On 17/8/57, Hála informs Husson that, based on his report from the Parisian trip, the Czech ministry has promised to invite Husson to Prague the following year. On 16/12/57, Husson accepts the invitation and further informs Hála about a congress of the Italian Society of Experimental Phonetics (Gemelli) scheduled for September 1958 in Milan on the acoustic structure of consonants. Husson also mentions that the *Manual of Phonetics* has been published but criticizes it as a collection of “old fantasies,” “outdated even before its publication.” He wonders when a “serious handbook” will be published.

Hála responded to the letter on 19/1/58, saying nothing of the congress but commenting on the *Manual* and Husson’s remark: “We drew up the plan together in Paris. I don’t give it up, but for the moment there are so many pressing difficulties and other obstacles that this project must be postponed; we’ll talk about it when the opportunity arises.”

Eventually, Husson stayed in Prague in June 1959. He wrote to Hála on 11/5/59: “Important! I will certainly talk to you about our project, sketched out two years ago! Make a phonetics manual by our collaboration.” Husson alleges that Panconcelli-Calzia has said to him that Kaiser’s manual was already “born dead.” Husson asks Hála to prepare a tentative list of contents for their new manual to be discussed in detail during his stay in Prague.

The visit was a success. Husson was pleasantly surprised by the progress of the Prague laboratories, writing on 16/6/59: “I remain stupefied and profoundly enthusiastic! [...] It’s a model institution, the first of its kind in the world, that you have brought to life in Prague! [...] I have the impression, here, of returning to the past! I feel like in the plain Middle Ages.”

Unfortunately, this is the last extant letter between the two from this period. Also, their collaboration on the manual was not continued, and nothing was published (the second edition of the *Manual of Phonetics* from 1968 [4] was an independent activity).

2. POST-WAR CONGRESSES

2.1. First post-war ICPhS: Helsinki, 1961

Almost a quarter of a century (1938–1961) passed between the third congress in Ghent and the fourth in Helsinki. In May 1960, Circular #1 was disseminated, announcing the event and explaining the intermission. “After the impossibility of having a Congress in 1958 had become obvious, the Finnish colleagues offered to stage the Fourth Congress at Helsinki in 1961. On January 30th, 1959, they were informed by Professor Roman Jakobson, the President of the [PC], that the Council had accepted the offer.” Both Hála and de Lacerda were members of the PC. As a result, Hála

finally participated in his second ICPhS, presenting an article on the phonetic nature of the syllable [5].

The PC underwent significant changes. Jakobson jokingly remarked that given the long gap, the “Council membership threatened to become permanent” as well. Dennis Fry was elected the new President, Hála Vice-President. In the final session, the PC accepted E. Zwirner’s offer, and Bochum (later changed to Münster) was selected as the site for the 5th congress. Prague was proposed and tentatively selected for the 6th congress.

Hála also initiated here the restart of the International Society of Phonetic Sciences (ISPhS), with the aim to “constitute a permanent link between all phoneticians of the world” [6: xxviii].

2.2. Münster, 1964

Hála attended the congress, delivering a paper on the historical development of the Czech <ř> sound (/r̥/) [7]. Hála was Vice-President of the PC. The council decided at the congress that the next one would take place in three years in Prague, chaired by Hála. It’s worth noting that Hála had initially suggested organizing a congress in Prague to Kaiser in 1956 (and to himself in 1955, if not earlier). More than ten years had passed between conceiving and holding the event. Hála was 73 years old at the time of the 6th ICPhS.

3. THE PRAGUE CONGRESS

3.1. Organizing Committee (OC)

On 24/3/65, the first meeting of the OC convened in Prague. Members included phoneticians but also phonologists, linguists and medical specialists, a total of 18 people. A narrower group of five individuals (four phoneticians and one administrative member), formed the Executive Committee, which met informally on a regular basis and held formal meetings 3–4 times a year. Although the organizer was the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, the primary responsibilities were carried out by the phoneticians from Charles University. Hála served as the President of the congress, while Milan Romportl assumed the roles of General Secretary and Chair of the Executive Committee and scientific programme committee. Přemysl Janota chaired the technical committee and Alena Skaličková was in charge of the social committee.

In December 1965, Circular #1 was distributed to all participants from Helsinki and Münster, as well as to selected universities, academies, and phonetic institutions worldwide. Additionally, the text was published in various journals, such as *Phonetica* and *Zeitschrift für Phonetik*. The circular provided information about the theme of the congress (“Acoustic Speech Signal and its Perception”), the date and

location (Sept. 7–13, 1967, Prague) and the official languages (English, German, French, Russian). Application forms were to be returned by March 15, 1966. A total of five circulars were issued.

Importantly, the OC coordinated the phonetic congress with the organizers of the 10th International Congress of Linguists in Bucharest, Romania, which took place a week before. This arrangement allowed overseas participants to attend both events. Furthermore, there was an agreement regarding the content, as phonetics and phonology papers were allocated exclusively to Prague and not to Bucharest.

The budget had to be repeatedly revised due to unforeseen circumstances. The original plans were based on the number of participants from the post-war congresses (cca 250 people). However, due to an unprecedented interest in the Prague event, the number of participants reached 606, necessitating adjustments in the budget. Additionally, constant changes in contracts and prices resulted in the reduction of some services, such as simultaneous interpretation being available only in the main auditorium instead of the parallel sessions as initially planned. The final budget was approved by the Czech Academy on 29/6/67.

The congress correspondence was extensive (1225 pages). The content is mostly organizational, related to travel, accommodation and registration/submission.

3.2. Scientific programme

There were five **plenary lectures**, related to the congress theme. The invited speakers talked for 30–45 min, followed by 60 min for discussion. During the sixth meeting of the OC (23/3/67), there was a discussion about whether a Czech representative should also have a plenary lecture and who it should be. However, this idea was eventually rejected and, instead, Hála was asked to deliver a historical summary of the development of Czechoslovak phonetics in his opening speech.

There were 278 talks in **parallel sessions** (five/six at once), of which 235 are included in the proceedings [8]. The main areas – Physiology and pathology of speech, Acoustics and perception of speech, Phonology and linguistic phonetics, and Biophonetics – were introduced with a longer paper (30 min) followed by a 15-min discussion. However, Husson's introduction was missing as he unexpectedly and angrily withdrew all participation in May 1967 in response to the 4th Circular. To avoid simultaneous occurrence of related topics in different sessions, the remaining contributions were organized into triads of papers. Each author had 10 min for presentation, and there was a joint 15-min discussion of the three contributions. This required precise timing and synchronization across the rooms. To great acclaim, a

system of centralized optical signalization was designed and constructed, displaying the current presentation order (1 / 2 / 3 / D) in the rooms and in the foyer.

In addition to paper presentations, the congress also featured **other activities** such as scientific films, demonstrations of phonetic instruments and research equipment, and an exhibition of literature and apparatus. A **round-table discussion** involving 14 participants was also held to discuss the present-day tasks of the phonetic sciences, and a summary was included in the proceedings.

4. ISPhS SYMPOSIA

On 1/2/57, Kaiser wrote to the PC expressing uncertainty about whether ISPhS was still in existence, as it had been inactive until the first post-war congress. However, at the 4th ICPhS, the idea was born to have smaller events – symposia – dedicated to specific fields. Two such symposia were organized in 1970 in Czechoslovakia under the patronage of the ISPhS.

Milan Romportl held a **Symposium on Intonology** in Prague (October 6–8), marking the 50th anniversary of the Institute of Phonetics. The proceedings [9] was dedicated to the memory of Hála, who had passed away a few weeks before the event. The papers focused on various issues in intonation, including methods of pitch registration. In his closing speech, ISPhS Secretary General Martin Kloster-Jensen stressed the “need for the exchange of ideas especially in the form of personal contacts realized through symposia [*sic*] in the way in which it has been practised here.” He further entreated the 109 participants to “try and fill the vacuum between the international congresses [...] with meetings on a smaller scale.” [9: 289].

Some of the participants moved on to Brno, where a **Symposium of Paedolinguistics** (child speech) was organized by Karel Ohnesorg, Hála's former student and assistant [2]. It took place on October 14–16 and attracted 56 researchers from 14 countries, who presented a total of 34 contributions [10].

5. CONCLUSION

Although many people were involved in organizing the 1967 ICPhS, it was B. Hála's merit that the congress took place in Prague at all. Hála had long dreamed of a phonetics congress and had been instrumental in pressuring various individuals, particularly L. Kaiser, towards organizing such an event. His acceptance into the Permanent Council in 1956 and subsequent election as its Vice-President in 1961 marked a significant step forward, underscoring the excellent reputation of Prague phonetics in the 1960s. In addition to congresses, the importance of ISPhS or IPA in the organized life of phonetics should also be acknowledged.

6. REFERENCES

- [1] Meinsma, G. L. 1973. In memoriam Louise Kaiser: A remarkable woman. *Proc. Institute of Phonetic Sciences* 3, 122–149. Available online: <https://www.fon.hum.uva.nl/archive/>.
- [2] Šturm, P. 2019. The birth of an institute: A centennial jubilee of Prague's Institute of Phonetics. *AUC Philologica* 2/2019, 9–26.
- [3] Kaiser, L. (ed). 1957. *Manual of Phonetics*. North-Holland Publishing Company.
- [4] Malmberg, B. (ed). 1968. *Manual of Phonetics [2nd ed]*. North-Holland Publishing Company.
- [5] Hála, B. 1962. La nature phonétique de la syllabe. *Proc. 4th ICPhS Helsinki*, 418–427.
- [6] Zwirner, E., Bethge, W. (eds). 1965. *Proceedings of the Fifth International Congress of Phonetic Sciences Held at the University of Münster 16–22 August 1964*. S. Karger.
- [7] Hála, B. 1965. Sur la hiérarchie des éléments phoniques des sons du langage. *Proc. 5th ICPhS Münster*, 332–335.
- [8] Hála, B., Romportl, M., Janota, P. (eds). 1970. *Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress of Phonetic Sciences Held at Prague 7–13 September 1967*. Academia.
- [9] Romportl, M., Janota, P. (eds). 1972. *AUC Philologica 1, Phonetica Pragensia III: Symposium on Intonology, Prague, October 6–8, 1970*. Univerzita Karlova.
- [10] Ohnesorg, K. (ed). 1972. *Colloquium Paedolinguisticum: Proceedings of the First International Symposium of Paedolinguistics Held at Brno, 14–16 October 1970*. Mouton.

Archival material used:

Archive of the Masaryk University, fond B91, box 14, inventory number 655:

- 6th ICPhS Organizing Committee reports

Unorganized archive of the Institute of Phonetics, Charles University:

- 6th ICPhS congress correspondence
- 6th ICPhS final report to the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences
- 6th ICPhS materials (Circular #1, Programme)
- circulars of Louise Kaiser to members of the Permanent Council
- personal correspondence between Bohuslav Hála and Agostino Gemelli, Raoul Husson, Louise Kaiser, and Armando de Lacerda