



Mary Ellen Rooney on dry land.

The Fishing Harvest In South Bohemia

By Mary Ellen Rooney

White Aspen with brass-colored leaves, dripping heavily with the moisture garnered from weeks of unremitting fog, create a typical atmosphere for harvesting a South Bohemian fish pond this early November morning. Calling gulls and heron feast on fish that were left behind when the pond was drained two days ago. Water supply has been systematically decreased for two weeks so that the fish might gradually be gathered into the harvest pit without being harmed.

It is a perfect Autumn day. One of my students from Stredni Rybarska Technicka Skola, the secondary vocational fishery school where I am teaching in the Czech Republic, emerges on the wet and muddy path that surrounds the Selibovsky Pond. I take his

photograph but cannot tarry because we are late. The harvesting began yesterday. I note the unusual brightness of the green moss on the trees while we walk about 50 feet into the forest that borders the pond where the final steps of the gathering process are under way.

The road atop the pond dam is lined with local spectators and *capik* (who will scavenge the area for a nice fat fish that the gatherers may leave behind). They stand on the high ground smoking cigarettes. Their long-handled nets lean against the trees. One old man seems to already have his share of carp in the plastic sack he is carrying. Perhaps he bought them. I am reminded of the old days (the '50s) in Bridgehampton when we used to go down to Georgica Beach and battle the gulls for a nice weakfish or a bluefish that got away from the Havens' haulseining crew. It is a part

of my youth that is very vivid. Here I do not hear the pounding of the Atlantic, nor do I wade out into the foaming surf. Yet all the same I am satisfied to be near this heavily sedimented clay-colored pond in South Bohemia because I know that I am in the midst of something real.

Old Methods

Part of that reality is that the methods being employed at this pond are very old. This has always attracted me. Not that I'm an antiquarian. But I have a shaker streak that likes to get the physical world correct and working so that my mind can be free for imagining. "Vylov," as Czechs call the process of harvesting fish from cultivated ponds, dates back to the early 12th Century. These early designs of technology were so successful that in the 14th Century more ponds were built and today pond fishing is a major industry in this small inland country.

According to Martin Fleishhans, a fish geneticist with the Research Institute in Vodnany, who has come along this morning to interpret between me and Ing Merton, the director of the fishing school, "Many of the early methods of filling and emptying ponds were so logically conceived that they are still used today." The Sluice System (small sluice boards inserted in Monks to control the flow of water) is being used at this pond. Today the gatherers will use either bottom nets or pond nets depending on the circumstances. I am reminded again of eastern Long Island's fishing methods (trap fishing, fykes, and haulseining) which were said to have been learned from Native Americans. It crosses my mind that the salt-water fish might become extinct before we give up methods which still work.

I ask Martin whether there is a geological explanation for the fog. Has it been caused by some pre-existing pit structure in the vicinity and might that account for the many ponds that were constructed here? He explains, "Our ancestors of the 14th Century carefully researched the areas where pond fish-

ing could be most successfully employed. They found them to be this area which is named the Ceske Budejovice Basin along with certain areas of Moravia and Slovakia."

Fattening Ponds

The fish that are being harvested this morning are carp. Selibovsky is a finishing pond. The fish have been stocked here for two years and are about four-years old. During the first two years of their lives they are put into small nursery ponds. In the second year, when they weight 300 to 500 grams, they are moved into fattening ponds for another two years. The selection of fattening ponds is according to how big you want your fish to grow which depends on the drainage system. The acreage of this pond is 45 hectares and its yield is 50,000 kilograms or 50 tons.

The boys at the Stredni Rybarska are in their high school years and are learning the trade of fishing from many aspects: ecological, scientific, and commercial. They come primarily from Slovakia, Moravia, and the Czech Republic. Stredni Rybarska is the only school of its kind in Europe. When their studies are completed these students will have jobs in the fishing industry either in Europe, Australia, or New Zealand. They will need English language skills in order to do the business that is required of them. I have elected to create a curriculum that pertains to the work they do. Soon they will know more about early Long Island fishing methods. This will connect them in a real way to the world beyond where they were born. It probably has something to do with why I am here. The process of expansion is mutual for the students and the teacher.

Mary Ellen Rooney is a writer and ESL teacher who lives in Bridgehampton. She is a native Long Islander who went to teach in the Czech Republic for the Soros Foundation English Teaching Program. One of her assignments was to provide English language instruction at a fishing school.



Two students receive instruction on the art of pond fishing.



Carrying the net up from a pond at the end of a long day.