

**Ladislav Holy: A Larger-Than-Life Character
with Extremely Strong Opinions**
An Interview with Kate Holy
(Featuring Petr Skalník)

Kate Holy, the widow of the renowned Czech-British anthropologist Ladislav Holý, lives in St Andrews in Scotland and administers the Ladislav Holy Memorial Trust,¹ established to promote anthropological research, at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of St Andrews. The Trust, founded in 1997 after Professor Holy's death, also administers the David Riches Medal for the best piece of postgraduate writing in social anthropology and sponsors the Ladislav Holy Memorial Lecture held at the University of St Andrews. The University Library's Special Collections unit houses the Ladislav Holy Archive, containing his fieldnotes, ethnographic material, correspondence, and a photographic collection from his Africanist fieldwork.

This interview started when I met with Kate Holy in November 2023 in St Andrews when I was preparing the publication of the Czech translation of Ladislav Holý's book *Anthropological Perspectives on Kinship* (Pluto Press, 1996; in Czech *Příbuzenství v antropologické perspektivě*, Karolinum Press, 2025). As the holder of the copyright for the texts and pictures from Ladislav Holý's fieldwork in Africa, Kate was so kind as to grant Karolinum Press, the Prague publisher, the rights to publish the pictures and materials from the archive. Kate and I had had a very interesting talk about Ladislav Holý and his life in Scotland and Czechoslovakia, and Kate agreed to answer a few questions for an interview. The interview continued via e-mail and was supplemented with additional answers to my questions provided by the Czech anthropologist Petr Skalník. I also interviewed Eliška Fučíková, the sister of Alice Fučíková, who was the first wife of L. Holy. I would like to express my gratitude to Kate Holy, Eliška Fučíková, and Petr Skalník, for all their helpfulness and kindness.

* * *

How did you meet Ladislav Holy? What was your life together like?

Ladislav and I lived in the same village in Fife – in Kingsbarns.² I knew him and his wife, Alice [Fučíková], a bit – not as close friends but as acquaintances.

¹ Ladislav Holy Memorial Trust <https://lhmt.org.uk/>.

² Kingsbarns is a village in the county of Fife, about 11 kilometres from St Andrews, Scotland.

After Alice³ died and my husband left me, a mutual friend had us to dinner and eventually Ladislav and I formed a relationship. He had to learn to get along with my young children, and although we were very close, we retained our two houses, where he could work in his own study with his dog, and I could be with my children and cats! However, we spent most of our waking time together and were very happy. We holidayed together and he introduced me to his friends and relatives in Prague and, of course, he met all my family, too. After two years we learned he had terminal prostate cancer and this brought us even closer, and he spent the last six months of his life, when he became unwell, finally living in my house.

When you met Ladislav, did you know he was a Czech emigrant? Could you tell by his accent? Was there something about him that reminds you he was Czech?

I always knew that Ladislav was Czech and cannot remember when I heard this first. He told me the story of his and Alice's exile during the Communist times⁴ before I had a relationship with him. He had a very strong Czech accent always, even though his English was pretty good.

Did you talk with Ladislav about his work? Was he working on his last book while you were living together?

I did talk about Ladislav's work with him and in fact he worked on a number of books in our time together – his Czech nation book⁵ and various essays. I corrected the English in his work, which was sometimes a bit eccentric. I also, as he became more ill, typed his work by dictation. The last work was an essay on the nature of 'home', edited by his colleague Nigel Rapport.⁶

Whom did he consider his teachers?

I don't know the answer about who he considered to be his teachers. He certainly knew Ernest Gellner. Petr Skalník might know more about this.

Petr Skalník: Ladislav and Milan Stuchlík studied ethnography and archaeology. In ethnography, they were probably pupils of Karel Chotek and Otakar Pertold,

³ Alice Fučíková, Ladislav Holý's first wife.

⁴ 'Ladislav and Alice did not return to Czechoslovakia after Ladislav's tenure as head of the Livingstone Museum in Zambia ended in 1968. After learning no position had been kept for him in Prague, he decided to move to the United Kingdom.' (from the interview with E. Fučíková, 13 November 2024). 'Alice visited Prague from Zambia in the early 1970s. In the winter of 1989, Ladislav and Alice visited Prague together after they, as British citizens, paid a ransom in 'small Pound notes' (as Ladislav ironically told me) to the Czechoslovak Embassy in London.' (from e-mail correspondence with P. Skalník, 29 May 2025).

⁵ Holý, L. (2001). *Malý český člověk a velký český národ: Národní identita a postkomunistická transformace společnosti* (translated by Z. Uherek). Sociologické nakladatelství (SLON).

⁶ Holý, L. (1998). The metaphor of 'Home' in Czech nationalist discourse, in Nigel Rapport – Andrew Dawson (eds), *Migrants of Identity: Perceptions of 'Home' in a World of Movement* (pp. 111–137). Berg.

or Drahomíra Stránská. But Ladislav never mentioned his teachers. He was self-taught in social anthropology and African studies. I say this as his pupil and a person who was in contact with him until 1996 (the last time I saw him was at EASA in Barcelona⁷). I used to visit Kingsbarns, staying with Alice and Ladislav and later only Ladislav, but earlier I also attended the annual conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists in Edinburgh in 1980 on folk models, co-organised by both Ladislav and Milan Stuchlík. Stuchlík died the same year. The book *Actions, Norms, and Representations*,⁸ resulting from their close cooperation, had to be finished by Ladislav alone.⁹

Ladislav did his fieldwork in Africa – first with the Berti in Sudan and later with the Toka in Zambia. Did he keep coming back to his African ‘fields’ after he came to the UK in 1968?

I think he visited Sudan for the sixth time after leaving the Livingstone Museum, as his final field trip there concluded in 1986 and he finished writing his book *Religion and Custom in a Muslim Society*¹⁰ not long after his first wife Alice’s death in 1990. As I understand it, his work on the Toka was carried out earlier, while he was the Director of the Livingstone Museum, and his book on the Toka was published earlier than his book on the Berti, in 1986.¹¹

Did Ladislav return to the Czech Republic before 1989? Did he keep in touch with Czech scholars or institutions?

Ladislav was unable to return to the Czech Republic prior to 1989 and he and Alice had been sentenced to prison and their property confiscated when he decided not to return there after 1968, when he left his role at the Livingstone Museum in Zambia. This had to be administratively sorted out after the Velvet Revolution so they were able to return. (See footnote 4.)

How did he remember Czechoslovakia? How did he feel about the dissolution of Czechoslovakia?

Ladislav was a larger-than-life character with extremely strong opinions. He spoke of political developments in (then) Czechoslovakia, in particular during the Soviet era, with anger and horror. He was a big supporter of the Prague Spring and devastated at the subsequent occupation by the USSR. He was never afraid to speak his mind. He was also very dismissive of Slovakia separating from the union and thought they would do very badly on their own.

⁷ Conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists in Barcelona in 1996 <https://easaonline.org/conferences/easa1996/>.

⁸ Holy, L., & Stuchlík, M. (1983). *Actions, norms and representations. Foundations of anthropological inquiry*. Cambridge University Press.

⁹ From e-mail correspondence with Petr Skalník on 23 August 2024 and 29 May 2025.

¹⁰ Holý, L. (1991). *Religion and custom in a Muslim society: The Berti of Sudan*. Cambridge University Press.

¹¹ Holy, L. (1986). *Strategies and norms in a changing matrilineal society. Descent, succession and inheritance among the Toka of Zambia*. Cambridge University Press.

Petr Skalník: Ladislav attended the 2nd EASA conference in Prague in the summer of 1992. I was present at his discussion with Ernest Gellner, where they agreed that the division of Czechoslovakia would be quite acceptable. It came about by the end of the same year.

Did Ladislav follow the developments in Czechoslovakia during and after 1989? Did he ever consider going back to Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic after 1989?

He stayed in touch with all his friends and family before and after 1989 so was in close touch with all the events there. However, he had made his own life in Scotland and, to my knowledge and in my time, had no thoughts of returning permanently to Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic after 1989. He visited regularly and lived there for six months in 1991/2 while writing his book *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation*. So, his links were very close. What he might have done if Alice had not died and he had not become ill, I can't tell. All his life he was a Czech. He spoke English with a strong Czech accent, and he identified as Czech.

Did you visit Prague with him? How did you like it?

I visited Prague with him on a few occasions with my children and Ladislav. I loved Prague. All Ladislav's family and friends were very welcoming to me and I have stayed in touch with some of them. This was in the 1990s before Prague became a strong tourist destination. I loved its beauty, its art, and the friendliness of all I met.

Ladislav Holy had lived in Scotland since 1979. What was his relationship to his 'second homeland'? What did he like and dislike about Scotland?

Ladislav loved the outdoors and the countryside and loved living in and near places where he could walk and hike. He definitely considered Scotland his home, despite having a close relationship with his natal homeland. I can't think of anything about Scotland he disliked. He was pretty scathing about all governments and politics. He very much enjoyed being the founder of the Social Anthropology Department at St Andrews, though the admin drove him crazy. All his staff were very fond of him and respected him. He was a very unusual and freely spoken man and often said things that other people would be worried to say.

Apart from the scholarly literature – did he read fiction? What genres/authors did he like?

He basically read anthropology. I never saw Ladislav reading any fiction. He did read other non-fiction concerning botany and gardening.

Petr Skalník: He once mentioned to me that he preferred reading other people's anthropology monographs, in particular 'We, the Tikopia'.¹²

¹² Firth, R. (1936). *We, the Tikopia. A sociological study of kinship in primitive Polynesia*. George Allen and Unwin, Ltd.

Can you tell me more about Ladislav's gardening? What did he grow? What did he like about his garden?

I can only tell you that when I met Alice and Ladislav they were very keen gardeners and their garden was both beautifully designed and able to provide them with fruit and vegetables. Alice was very creative. She made Ladislav's clothes, she cooked beautiful meals and gardened, as well as being extremely clever herself.

Petr Skalník: It was mostly Alice who did the gardening.

The Ladislav Holy Memorial Trust was established at the University of St Andrews after Ladislav's death. How does it work? What are the main activities of the Trust?

I established the Ladislav Holy Memorial Trust in 1998, after Ladislav died, together with Roy Dilley, now Professor Dilley, who worked with Ladislav in the Department and was a close friend. It is an independent charity. An ex-student of Ladislav donated generously after the fund was set up. We have invested the money and spend it on grants to students and staff at the University of St Andrews. Grants for undergraduates and master's students to help with their fieldwork expenses was the first aim. We also expanded to supporting staff conferences and postgraduate workshops.¹³ We make an award every year for the best PhD chapter for students who have not yet submitted their PhDs. This is called the David Riches Memorial Medal¹⁴ – Riches was the first anthropologist to join Ladislav at St Andrews when the Department started. The grant awards are mediated by external assessors.

You mentioned the Trust supports the fieldwork of undergraduates and master's students of anthropology at St Andrews. Are there any typical fields or topics among anthropology students today?

I don't think so. There has always been a wide variety of topics that students are interested in, and this is one of the pleasures of being able to financially support some of them over the years.

Thank you very much for your answers!

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¹³ Student Travel and Research Fund, Ladislav Holy Memorial Trust: <https://lhmt.org.uk/student-travel-fund/>.

¹⁴ David Riches Postgraduate Medal, Ladislav Holy Memorial Trust: <https://lhmt.org.uk/david-riches-postgraduate-medal/>.



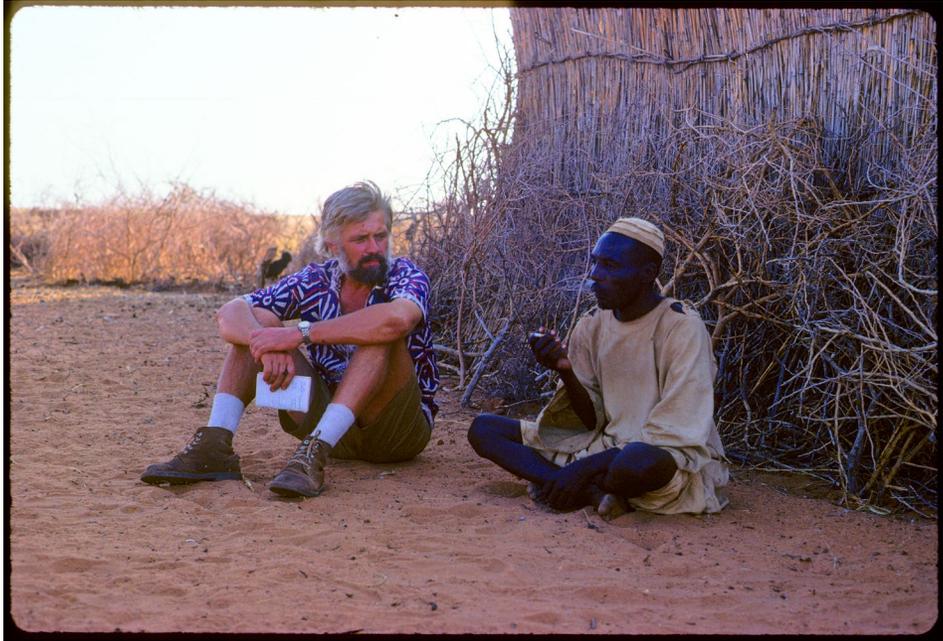
Ladislav Holý, Berti tribe, Sudan. Courtesy of the University of St Andrews Libraries and Museums, ID: 2013-7-112.¹⁵

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A short biography and selected bibliography of Ladislav Holý

Ladislav Holý was born in 1933 in Prague. He began his professional career at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, and worked mainly for the Czech Academy of Sciences. He also worked for the Náprstek Museum in Prague. He started his fieldwork with the Berti of Sudan in 1961 with the support of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and in 1965 with the support of the International African Institute of London. In 1968 he became the director of the Livingstone Museum in Zambia. After Warsaw Pact troops invaded Czechoslovakia in August 1968, he decided not to return to his homeland. When his tenure ended in Zambia, he emigrated to the United Kingdom and after a stint at Cambridge obtained an academic position in the Department of Social Anthropology at Queen's University of Belfast in Northern Ireland. In Belfast, Holý was joined by Milan Stuchlík, with whom he had a lifelong friendship. Holý and Stuchlík worked in the Department

¹⁵ We thank Ms. Kate Holy, who manages the Ladislav Holy Estate, for permission to use the photographs. The digitization of the photographs was carried out by the staff of the University of St Andrews libraries and museums.



Ladislav Holý talking to a member of the Berti tribe, Sudan. Courtesy of the University of St Andrews Libraries and Museums, ID: 2013-7-119.

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of Social Anthropology and published together until Stuchlík's untimely death in 1980.

In 1979, Ladislav Holý began lecturing at the University of St Andrews in Scotland, where he built the Department of Social Anthropology. In 1987 he was appointed a professor and named the head of the Department. Holý and his wife, Alice, settled near the town of St Andrews, where they built a beautiful garden with statues of Jan Koblasa, another Czech émigré, who was Ladislav's friend. Alice, who had accompanied him on most of his fieldwork, died in 1990. After her death, Ladislav met Kate Mortimer, with whom he spent the last years of his life, and the couple married in 1996, a few months before his death. Ladislav Holý died on 13 April 1997 at the age of 64.

Ladislav Holý contributed to the development of social anthropology mainly with his Africanist research on the Sudanese Berti and Zambian Toka, but also with more theoretically oriented writings (most notably, *Actions, Norms, and Representations*, with M. Stuchlík, Cambridge University Press, 1983), including works on the theory of kinship. Although he visited Czechoslovakia before and after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 to do his last research, his work is not very well known in the Czech academic environment. So far, only one of his many books has been

translated into Czech – *Malý český člověk a skvělý český národ* (*The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation*, 1996; in Czech 2001, reprinted in 2024). The publication of *Kinship in Anthropological Perspective* (1996) in Czech (*Příbuzenství v antropologické perspektivě*, Karolinum, 2025), Holý's last – and distinctly theoretical – work, will help to fill this empty space.

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