CHAPTER 11

Inheritance Practice and the Elderly in Central Europe: The Example of Western Bohemia, 1700–1850

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1 Introduction

In contrast to other stages of life, old age is to a certain extent difficult to delimit.1 People perceive old age individually, their own as well as that of others. Some individuals are still active at a very advanced age, others look forward to old age as a time of retirement and cannot wait to see it coming. Although the dates defining old age have been viewed as somewhat arbitrary in the past and present alike, there are important differences between old age in the past and nowadays. In pre-industrial rural society, people’s choices of how they would spend their old years were much more restricted. This final stage of their life was profoundly influenced by a whole range of circumstances, including physical condition, social status or family. Also the percentage of people who did reach advanced old age was significantly lower, for a number of reasons.

In the first place, only about one half of the population was able to escape the dangers of childhood, with its high mortality rate. If people survived into adulthood, their chances of reaching a high age increased. Nevertheless, in the pre-industrial period the elderly accounted for only a small percentage of the overall population – in the 18th century, the share of people over sixty did not usually exceed 10%. In France, for instance, this share is estimated at less than 8%, in England at 9% to 10%,2 in Bohemia, estimates exist for

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people over fifty, whose share was approximately 11%. Nevertheless, old age has always been an important phenomenon, associated with various historical concepts, theories and stereotypes.

One of the typical stereotypes considers traditional society to have been ideal for the co-existence of several generations. According to such beliefs, old people were supposed to be part of an extensive network of relatives, who supported them and cared for them, not leaving them to manage alone. The modern era of industrialization and urbanization is sometimes believed to have disrupted this traditional way of life and torn older people away from this ideal community. However, research carried out in this field has shown that in Western Europe, the co-existence of several generations within one household has never been a prevailing model. On the contrary, in numerous societies, including Bohemia, a typical household (simple family household) consisted of the nuclear family, i.e. parents and children; when the children grew up, they set up their own families, while their parents usually continued to run their own separate household. People who lived by themselves in their old age were not an exception. Richard Wall states that, at the turn of the 18th and the 19th centuries, only about 5% of the children continued to live with their parents on a permanent basis after the wedding.