

Polish ethnic organisations in Brno between the wars and in the years 1945–1952 and their contribution to the development of Czech-Polish cultural and educational relations

František Čapka / e-mail: capka@ped.muni.cz
Department of History, Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

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The study describes the activities of the Polish ethnic organizations in Brno from the beginning of the First Republic (1918) till the early 50s of the 20th century. In the introductory part it briefly mentions some aspects of Czech-Polish relations from 19th century, crucial is the part describing the content of the activities of these associations. There are described the main directions of their activities. At the end there is an overview of six ethnic organizations.

Key words: *ethnic organization; culture; public education; concerts; lectures; exhibitions; trips; books lending*

Before the First World War, cultural relations between our nation and foreign nations were extremely sporadic, and were restricted largely to our nearest neighbours. Two historical moments in the nineteenth century that provided a certain inspiration to the Czech national movement should be noted in relation to the Polish nation. The first was the November Uprising in Warsaw (1830) and the Cracow Uprising in February 1846, which were followed with great sympathy by Czech patriots (K. H. Mácha, F. Brauner), followed by the Polish January Uprising against Czarist Russia in the years 1863–1864, attitudes towards which further deepened the rift between the two currents of opinion in the Czech National Party camp: the Old Czechs headed by František Palacký, who took a critical view of the uprising, and set against them the Young Czechs, who sympathised with the Polish insurgents. It is worth noting here that almost 200 Polish revolutionaries were imprisoned at Špilberk Castle in Brno in the years 1839–1848.¹

¹ See: Tyrowicz, M. (1960): *Průvodce po Muzeu polských vězňů na Špilberku*. Brno; Bogdański, H. (1932): *Polský revolucionář na Špilberku*. Brno. Brno historian Z. Hájek studied this matter in detail, evidence of which is, for example, his study *Moravians and Polish Prisoners at Špilberk*. In *Časopis Matice moravské*, 54, 1930, p. 337–376; *Why Political Prisoners Were Imprisoned at Špilberk*. In *Vlastivědný věstník moravský*, 9, 1959, p. 63–68, 101–108.

The situation in the development of mutual relations in culture and education took on a new dimension following the establishment of the independent states Czechoslovakia and Poland in 1918. The Czechoslovak authorities, and in particular the Ministry of Education and National Culture, realised the importance of foreign relations in general terms, for which reason a department for educational and cultural relations with abroad was established at this ministry, becoming an independent division in 1929.

It is natural that the intensity of the development of these relations and official support for them more or less copied the current situation in the position of mutual relations at the international political level. Czechoslovak foreign policy was, first and foremost, oriented towards allied France and the Anglo-Saxon countries, followed by the Southern Slavs of Yugoslavia; special attention in this area was devoted to Russian and Ukrainian emigrant circles. Czechoslovak-Polish relations, in contrast, were not initially given particular consideration (particularly after 1918). Unsuccessful talks on the territorial issue of Cieszyn led finally in January 1919 to the "Seven-day War" between the two new states. The situation became calmer in the following years, it is true (particularly following agreement on a treaty between the two states reached in Spa in Belgium), but official relations with Poland were considered merely "standard" by Czechoslovakia throughout the entire inter-war period.

We will first take a brief look at the situation regarding the creation of the system of international educational and cultural relations from the national viewpoint. The instigation of the above-mentioned department for educational and cultural relations with abroad was followed by the establishment of branches of international organisations such as the Rotary Club and the Pen Club, for example. Diverse societies, committees, institutions and clubs were established to cultivate relations with foreign nations, one of which was a Czechoslovak-Polish Society. These bodies had affiliated organisations abroad devoted to spreading knowledge about Czechoslovakia. Lectorships in the Czech language were also established at foreign universities, including Warsaw and Poznań in Poland. International congresses and conventions focusing on diverse aspects of science, culture, research and education became extremely important links for establishing mutual contacts. Large international congresses held in Czechoslovakia at which Polish participation was recorded included, for example, a congress of secondary school professors (1923), an anthropological congress (1924), a congress of anatomists (1927), a congress of phoniaticians and speech therapists, and a congress of music and theatre critics

(1930). Such international gatherings also provided inspiration for direct contacts between scientific experts, which found concrete form in a mutual publication exchange and, perhaps most importantly, in the organisation of exchange lecture residences at universities and exchanges between conductors and orchestras. These were gradually joined by exchanges between university students, initially organised as summer holiday schools; a form of exchange scholarships followed at the beginning of the nineteen thirties. Merely for the sake of interest, the largest numbers recorded were with France (20), followed by Italy (5), Romania (4) and Yugoslavia (3). There was just one with Poland. Other activities of this kind included mutual student relations organised by the Central Association of Czechoslovak Students, its foreign division and the Information Office for Studies Abroad.²

In addition to these activities, the protection of Czechoslovak compatriots living abroad also developed along official lines in the form of diverse organisations at the local and provincial level, within both the Komenský Society and the Czechoslovak Foreign Institute, and coordinated by the Ministry of Education and National Culture in cooperation with the Foreign Ministry.

A large number of organisations of many and varied kinds were established in Brno in the period after 1918.³ We will first focus our attention briefly on the activity of the ethnic societies in Brno that comprised part of the rich structure made up by organisations of the most varied kinds in the city in the years of the First Republic (1918–1938) and in the post-war period (1945–1952).

A total of 69 ethnic societies were founded in Brno in the given years. Attempts at establishing societies of this kind had already been made before 1918, such as the Russian Circle (1900), the Slavonic Foundation (1900) and the *Polish Circle*, authorisation for the establishment of which was issued on 2 December 1910 and whose constituent general assembly was held on 16 January 1911. This organisation held courses, lectures and exhibitions and published various brochures, magazines

² Praus, F. (1931): Kulturní styky s cizinou. In *Československá vlastivěda*, Volume X. Praha, Osvěta, p. 552–557.

³ Brno's register of clubs and societies during the period from the establishment of the Republic to 1948 distinguished such organisations according to their focus into the following categories: reading, fire fighters, business, humanitarian, cultural, consumer, lottery, religious, union, public education, music and singing, charity, legal, industrial, social, student, youth, shooting, school, technical, transport, commercial, physical education and sport, teacher, artistic, scientific, military and security, educational, hobby, health, and also ethnic. For more details see: The Moravian Archive (hereafter MA), B 26.

and other writings directed towards the “cultivation of social and cultural mutuality with the Polish nation”. President of the circle was František Veselý. The organisation brought its activities to an end as of 29 July 1921.

The first ethnic societies in the City of Brno after 1918 included an Anglo-American Club, the Association Francoise, a Czech-Russian Association, a Yugoslav Academic Veterinary Society and a Yugoslav Academic Mensa, all established during the course of 1919. This list is a clear reflection of the above-mentioned course of official Czechoslovak international political orientation.

The largest numbers of ethnic organisations were established in Brno in the years 1920–1931 (a total of 47 clubs and societies). Ethnic societies, just like other societies, were established according to the Act of Association of the December Constitution of 15 November 1867; the constitution of the Czechoslovak Republic of 29 February 1920 adopted the provisions on associations of this pre-Austrian constitution. The number of new societies established in the years of the great economic crisis fell rapidly following this initial “fever” lasting until 1931. Government decree no. 97 of 31 March 1939 applied during the Protectorate (1939–1945), and specified that all organisations established in accordance with Act 134/1867 that wanted to continue operating must notify the state police authority pertinent to the location of the organisation of this fact, otherwise they would cease to exist as of 30 June 1939; this decree led to the majority of these organisations (including all those oriented towards Poland) to cease operations. After the liberation, many of these organisations applied for re-registration in the register of clubs and societies of the City of Brno.

During the period studied, there were a total of six ethnic organisations focusing on Poland in the City of Brno. The first to be established was the *Czechoslovak-Polish Club* on 16 February 1925, joined five years later (24 May 1930) by the *Society of Polish Students in Brno* (*Zwiazek studentów Polaków v Brnie*) and shortly afterwards the *Society of Academic Poles from Lithuania in Brno – Samogitia* on 3 June 1930. Less than a year passed (21 February 1931) before university students from Warsaw in Brno founded their own *Warsaw Association of University Students in Brno*. The *Academic Circle of Friends of Poland* was short-lived, existing from 11 November 1933 to 30 May 1934. Following the liberation, a branch of the *Society for Cultural Relations with Poland* was also established in Brno (12 November 1946).

The foundation of the individual ethnic societies was accompanied by a number of inevitable instructions, directives and formalities from the

authorities. Each organisation had to apply for a licence from the pertinent police district (after the war the Provincial National Council in Brno) before it could be founded, followed by registration with the register of clubs and societies. The statutes of the society had to be submitted in four copies for this purpose, along with a colour depiction of the emblem of the organisation and the organisation's uniform, flag, etc. if and when appropriate in three copies. After the statutes and other supplements had been examined, the organisation was entered into the register of clubs and societies and issued with a licence certificate. A few days later, a constituent general assembly was to be held (the highest body of the organisation), which elected a committee. Auditors of accounts comprised other bodies of such organisations, while any disputes arising within the organisation were to be settled by a court of a justice of the peace. The organisation would be under continuous surveillance. Around a week before any planned events were to be held, its committee had to give notification to the police, who would generally send someone to "monitor" such activities and subsequently submit a report about them. Czechoslovak citizens and foreigners alike could become members of ethnic organisations; the committee would rule on the acceptance of members. An important feature of the statutes of these organisations was their democratic nature and their great plurality in the acceptance of members.

The activities of the individual organisations depended largely on the size of their membership; some had a membership in double figures, others such as the Society of Polish Students in Brno, for example, had more than a hundred members. Many of their activities – lectures, film screenings, concerts, exhibitions, social evenings, lending libraries of books, magazines and newspapers, language and conversation courses, excursions – would not have been possible without financial support from "outside", such as that provided by the Czechoslovak Foreign Institute or the Polish Embassy. Effective assistance was also provided by universities, namely Masaryk University and the Technical University in Brno, notably in the form of lectures, held mostly in Czech, though sometimes in Polish with a Czech translation. These organisations also co-operated with one another. Financial means (in addition to membership fees) were also obtained from the revenue from events held by the organisations such as, in addition to those mentioned above, dance evenings. The organisations were not allowed to conduct political activity of any kind, and their activities had to be of an exclusively non-political nature. The work of these organisations often included social assistance for students in the form of support for impoverished members,

food allowances or housing in student hostels. According to their statutes, the organisations would be terminated either by being officially dissolved or by voluntary dissolution. The reasons for voluntary dissolution were largely of a financial nature or a fall in membership.⁴

An overview of the activities of Polish ethnic organisations in Brno established after 1918

* *The Czechoslovak-Polish Club in Brno*

Established 16 February 1925, general assembly held 11 March of the same year at the Rector's Office at Masaryk University. The organisation's clubroom was the Mirror Hall at the Hotel Passage, Nová 23.

The president of the organisation was secondary technical college Maxmilián Kolaja; the membership of the club was comprised largely of students from Masaryk University and Brno Technical University.

Of the lectures given, we might mention two lectures by Zdeněk Hájek (at that time still grammar school professor) on the subject "The Relationship between the Population of Moravia and the Polish Prisoners at Špilberk" (5 February 1930) and "The 70th Anniversary of the Last Polish Uprising" (18 January 1933). His lectures were given in Polish. In addition to the above activities, the club also organised holiday jobs in Poland and issued a monthly "Czechoslovak-Polish Correspondence".

The organisation ceased to exist in accordance with article II of government decree 97/1939 Sb. z. a n. as of 30 June 1939. It was re-established on 30 March 1946, its president remaining Kolaja. The organisation was dissolved voluntarily in December 1947.⁵

* *The Society of Polish Students in Brno (Związek studentów Polaków v Brnie)*

The society was established on 24 May 1930. Its members were Polish students (as many as 68) studying at universities in Brno. They met up at the restaurant U Ševčků at Horova 46.

The society was headed in turn by the students Wieslaw Wiszniewski, Evžen Raczunas and Jozef Wardas. The principal activities of the society were, in addition to lectures and talks, excursions in the area

⁴ See: Kamenská, E. (1991): *Národnostní spolky v Brně v první polovině 20. století*. (Dissertation). Brno, The Faculty of Education at Masaryk University, p. 14–26.

⁵ MA, B 26, kart. 2618, ref. no. 81240.

around Brno and the loaning of books and magazines. The society ceased to exist in connection with the political situation following the occupation of Poland by Germany. The society announced its "voluntary" termination as of 2 October 1939.⁶

* *The Society of Academic Poles from Lithuania in Brno – Samogitia*

The society was established on 3 June 1930. Around 20 members of the society met up in the clubroom at the Na Růžku inn at Tábor 20 for talks on Polish culture in Lithuania in history and the present day, and diverse cultural events were also held here. A peculiarity of the members of the society was the fact that they wore caps of a grey velvet colour with a narrow purple ribbon on which the monogram of the society was embroidered in silver. They also wore a sash, also of a purple colour, across the chest.

The position of president was held in turn by Wieslaw Wisczniewski, Ludvik Makiewicz and Eduard Borkowski. The society ceased to exist on 13 May 1938 as the result of a fall in membership.⁷

* *The Warsaw Association of University Students in Brno*

Established on 21 February 1931 by student Jiří Adler, the association used premises in a café in Dobrovského Street as its clubroom. The student Mieczyslaw Forelle became president of the association. Lectures and talks were held in Czech and Polish, while excursions into the area around Brno proved particularly popular. From the middle of the nineteen thirties onwards, the activities of the association gradually declined as a result of its falling membership until the association was finally dissolved voluntarily as of 19 March 1937.⁸

* *The Academic Circle of Friends of Poland*

The constituent general assembly of the organisation, at which Jaroslav Standara was elected head of the Circle, was held on 11 November 1933 in the Great Hall at Masaryk University. The Academic Circle suffered from the very beginning from a small number of members, for which reason it proved impossible to implement its planned activities to the full. This eventually led to the dissolution of the organisation after around six months (as of 30 May 1934).⁹

⁶ MA, B 26, kart. 2613, ref. no. 81115.

⁷ MA, B 26, kart. 2575, ref. no. 56581.

⁸ MA, B 26, kart. 2570, ref. no. 40802.

⁹ MA, B 26, kart. 2531, ref. no. 831.

* *The Society for Cultural Relations with Poland, Brno branch*

The society received a licence on 12 November 1946, and its constituent general assembly was held at the Hotel Slávie on 16 January 1947. František Krejčí is stated as the founder of the society, but was replaced by M. Kolaja immediately following its foundation. The names of two distinguished personalities in academic life in Brno appeared among the leadership of the association – Chancellor of the Technical University in Brno and leading architect Jiří Kroha, and historian and Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Masaryk University J. Macůrek (both held the position of vice-president). Following his resignation from the position of president in November 1950, M. Kolaja was replaced by F. Krejčí.

In addition to traditional activities (lectures, excursion, concerts, exhibitions) the society also organised “Czechoslovak-Polish Friendship Weeks”. The exact reasons for the dissolution of the society are not available. The sources merely state abruptly that it “was dissolved on 14 October 1952”.¹⁰

¹⁰ MA, B 26, kart. 3305, ref. no. 130/52.