

Ceremony and Popular Culture. Festivities and Objects Connected with the National Theatre and other Czech Public Buildings before 1918

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Abstract. The present article focuses on the festivities held between the 1860s and 1914 in the Lands of the Bohemian Crown, which were associated with various construction phases of buildings essential for the Czech speaking society (especially the laying of the foundation stone or the grand opening). These festivities lie somewhere between the artificially constructed concepts of “high” and “low”, “the elite” and “the people”, and between “folk” and “mass” culture. The study aims to show that without the people, without an audience, these festivities would not be celebrations but just elite parties. Therefore, the nature of these festivals was primarily popular, as evidenced by many details, including their character, the accompanying theatre plays and souvenir items. The festivities and the whole idea of the National Theatre in Prague are examined in the first part of the article, followed by examples from other parts of the Czech lands, and finally, medals, postcards and promotional brochures are discussed.

Keywords: Architecture; Czech Lands; 19th century; Festivities; National Theatre; Popular Culture.

[es] Ceremonia y Cultura Popular. Festividades y objetos relacionados con el Teatro Nacional y otros edificios públicos checos antes de 1918

Resumen. El presente artículo se centra en las festividades celebradas entre las décadas de 1860 y 1914 en las Tierras de la Corona de Bohemia, que estuvieron asociadas a varias fases de construcción de edificios esenciales para la sociedad de habla checa (especialmente la colocación de la primera piedra o la gran inauguración). Estas festividades se encuentran en algún lugar entre los conceptos construidos artificialmente de “alto” y “bajo”, “la élite” y “el pueblo”, y entre la cultura “popular” y la “masa”. El estudio pretende demostrar que, sin el pueblo, sin público, estas fiestas no serían celebraciones sino fiestas de élite. Por lo tanto, la naturaleza de estos festivales era principalmente popular, como lo demuestran muchos detalles, incluido su carácter, las obras de teatro que los acompañan y los artículos de recuerdo. Las festividades y toda la idea del Teatro Nacional de Praga se examinan en la primera parte del artículo, seguidas de ejemplos de otras partes de las tierras checas y, finalmente, se analizan medallas, postales y folletos promocionales.

Palabras clave: arquitectura; tierras checas; siglo XIX; festividades; Teatro Nacional; cultura popular.

Summary. 1. Introduction. 2. The National Theatre in Prague. 3. Celebrations connected with the building of the National Theatre. 4. Festivities bound with other buildings. 5. Popular objects accompanying the erections of significant buildings. 6. Conclusions. 7. Written sources and bibliographical references.

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1. Introduction

The complexity of what popular culture is and what is not is far beyond the topic of this paper. Instead, inspired by Parker’s innovative approach², and in connection to

the local discourse³, I intend to examine some festivities bounded with architecture in the Lands of the Bohemian Crown in the era of the rule of emperor Francis Joseph I. (1848-1916). I intend to discover the character of this connection. I want to focus on the contrast between the

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² Holt N. Parker, “Toward a Definition of Popular Culture”, *History and Theory* 50, no. 2 (2011): 147-170.

³ Milena Lenderová, Tomáš Jiránek and Marie Macková, *Z dějin české každodennosti. Život v 19. Století* (Praha: Karolinum, 2013), 389-394; Ondřej Daniel, Tomáš Kavka and Jakub Machek et al., *Populární kultura v českém prostoru* (Praha: Karolinum, 2013); Jakub Machek, *Počátky populární kultury v českých zemích. Tištěná média a velkoměstská kultura kolem roku 1900* (Příbram: Pistorius & Olšanská, 2017); *Jdi na venkov! Výtvorné umění a lidová kultura v českých zemích 1800–1960*, ed. Tomáš Winter and Pavla Machalíková (Praha and Řevnice: Artefactum and Arbor Vitae, 2019).

role of the “elite” and the “common people” in these events⁴. Although architecture bears many meanings, we as art historians are inclined to consider it only a physical monument, with specific forms, spaces, or decorations. Nevertheless, architecture creates a social and living environment inside and around it in the urban space – and as such, it is a venue for many events. On the other hand, while scholars from other fields regularly examine, e.g., festivities, they often omit the event’s connection with architecture. As demonstrated in this article, I find connecting these approaches useful.

Regarding the situation in the Lands of Bohemian Crown in the period under review, it is necessary to say that ideas of nationalism played a crucial role in all aspects of life – from politics or business to culture and education. The wave of national revivals, which hit Europe in the 19th century, worsened relationships between the Czechophone and Germanophone population of the Lands of Bohemian Crown. Two communities that peacefully shared the same space for centuries suddenly competed with rivalry and frictions⁵. One example of how coexistence was sometimes complicated is that the Austrian municipal electoral system was based on paid taxes. However, most Moravian cities were inhabited by the Czech majority, but because of the electoral system were controlled by the economically stronger German minority. The Czechs fought against this by campaign according to which the “proper” Czechs were to shop only in stores owned by the Czechs and use the services of Czech craftsmen. Another campaign calls for placing children into Czech schools and supporting establish of these schools against the will of the German town councils⁶. The German population, in general, did not understand this Czech call for national emancipation and watched in horror as more Czechs migrated from the country-

side into the towns, which were for centuries Germanophone. Many musical compositions, theatre plays, literature, artworks, architecture, and festivities resulted from these national frictions on the cultural field.

2. The National Theatre in Prague

There is no other building in Czech modern history like the National Theatre in Prague (built 1868–1883). Delicate neo-renaissance architecture designed by Josef Zitek is one the finest examples of this style in Central Europe⁷. The solemn building decorates the sculptures and paintings depicting personifications and allegories of music and drama. However, iconographical motives from Czech national history are predominant-heroes (real and mythical), notable places of Bohemia and Moravia and scenes from history and myths. The whole ethos around the so-called “Golden Chapel” is primarily bound with the Czech national revival and nationalism. Furthermore, since nationalism was the leading idea of this time and place, it is essential that, as historian Miroslav Hroch states about categories of “national” and “popular”, contemporaries (“took the popular culture into consideration as a specific component of the national culture”)⁸.

One of the principal “myths” bound with the National Theatre, which is deeply rooted in Czech historical memory, attributes the crucial role in the development of the building not to “the elite” but to “the people”. The “myth” says that the building was funded only by the money raised in public collections in towns and villages in the Lands of the Bohemian Crown. This opinion dates back to the 1880s. One local newspaper, for example, states that (“the Czech people bore to the altar of the motherland [...] the sum of 800.000 guldens for the theatre. Lo and behold, the nation is a patron by itself since it has no noble patrons”)⁹. Therefore, it seems like a paradox – the ordinary people funded the building for “high” culture and the elite’s entertainment. There were indeed throngs of donors like, e.g., Václav Bosák, the politically active peasant in the village of Dolany in south-western Bohemia, who donated a whole one gulden in 1881¹⁰.

On the other hand, Emperor Franz Joseph I. donated 18.000 guldens and later, with Empress Elizabeth, another 20.000 guldens for the reconstruction after the fire of the National theatre in 1881. Hundreds of guldens were given (in total) by other members of the royal family, by the high aristocracy of Bohemia, as well as the new industrial nobility, by the municipalities, the Czech citizen elite (lawyers, entrepre-

⁴ I used these terms as they are defined in Czech historical discourse. See, e.g., *Občanské elity a obecní samospráva 1848-1918*, eds. Lukáš Fasora, Jiří Hanuš and Jiří Malíř (Brno: CDK, 2006); *Elites and Politics in Central Eastern Europe*, eds. Judit Pál and Vlad Popovici (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014).

⁵ About the nationalism in general see: Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Miroslav Hroch, *Národy nejsou dílem náhody. Příčiny a předpoklady utváření evropských národů* (Praha: Slon, 2011).

⁶ For the situation of Czechs and Germans in the Lands of Bohemian Crown see: Jiří Kořalka, *Tschechen im Habsburgerreich und in Europa 1815-1914. Sozialgeschichtliche Zusammenhänge der neuzeitlichen Nationsbildung und der Nationalitätenfrage in den böhmischen Ländern* (Wien: Verlag für Geschichte und Politik; München: Oldenbourg, 1991); Jan Křen, *Die Konfliktgemeinschaft Tschechen und Deutsche 1780-1918* (München: Oldenbourg, 1996); Ferdinand Seibt, *Deutschland und die Tschechen: Geschichte einer Nachbarschaft in der Mitte Europas* (München: Piper, 1998); Milan Řepa, *Moravané nebo Češi? Vývoj českého národního vědomí na Moravě v 19. Století* (Brno: Doplněk, 2001); Milan Řepa, “The Czechs, Germans and Sudetenland: Historiographical Dispute in the Heart of Europe”, in *Disputed Territories and Shared Pasts. Overlapping National Histories in Modern Europe*, eds. Tibor Frank and Frank Hadler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 303-328; Milan Řepa, *Moravané, Němci, Rakšané. Vlasti moravských Němců v 19. Století* (Praha: Historický ústav AVČR, 2014); Añadir referencia: Tomáš Valeš, *Příběhy slávy a zapomění. Znojemští umělci, jejich díla a osudy na sklonku baroka* (Brno: Barrister & Prncipal, 2014); Jiří Kořalka, *Tschechen und Deutschland im langen 19. Jahrhundert. Studien zum gegenseitigen Verhältnis 1800-1918* (Dresden: Thelem, 2018), 367-398.

⁷ See, e.g., Ákos Moravánszky, *Competing Visions: Aesthetic Invention and Social Imagination in Central European Architecture, 1867-1918* (Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1998); Michaela Marek, *Kunst und Identitätspolitik. Architektur und Bildkünste im Prozess der tschechischen Nationsbildung* (Köln, Weimar, and Wien: Böhlau 2004); Jindřich Vybíral, “Budování Národního divadla / Building the National Theatre”, in *Síla i budoucnost jest národu národnost / The Strength and Future of the Nation Is National Identity*, ed. Jindřich Vybíral (Praha: UMPRUM 2021), 316-364.

⁸ Hroch, *Národy*, 203 (English edition Miroslav Hroch, *European Nations. Explaining Their Formation* (New York: Verso, 2015) was inaccessible for me, so the translation is mine).

⁹ *Šumavan*, March 6, 1880, 107.

¹⁰ *Šumavan*, September 24, 1881, 444.

neurs, officials, doctors et cetera), by the banks from their profits and last but not least, the Kingdom of Bohemia, as a self-governing province of the Empire, subsidised the whole endeavour by hundreds of thousands of guildens¹¹. (That is why the official name of the theatre became the Royal Bohemian Land and National Theatre.) Therefore, the theatre was not funded exclusively by “the people”. Additionally, it was not exclusively for “the people” since the regular tickets cost about one gulden for seats in the main parts of the auditorium and more for the loges¹². Only the worst places for standing viewers in the back of the auditorium were accessible for lower-income people (Fig. 1).

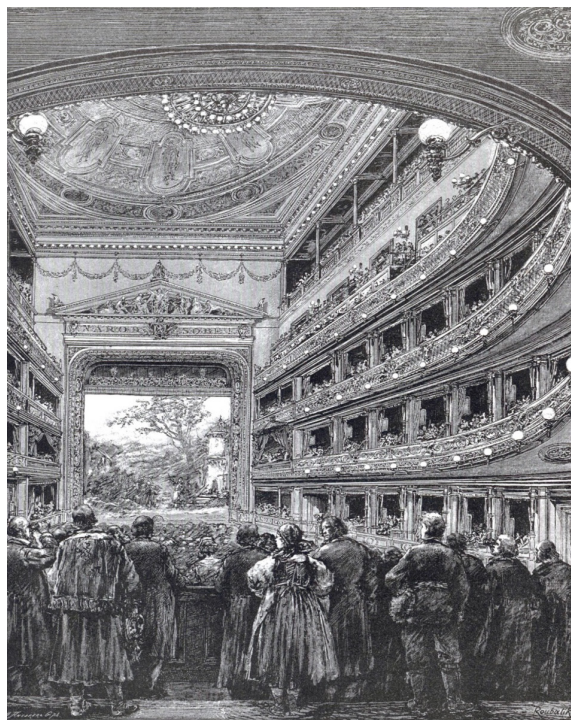


Figure 1. Bohumil Roubalík, *Auditorium of the National Theatre with the worst places occupied by common people depicted romantically in folk costumes*. Source: František Adolf Šubert, *Národní divadlo v Praze dějiny jeho i stavba dokončená*, Praha: J. Otto, 1881, p. 283.

It is thus a paradox of another kind. The Czech political elite mobilised all social classes in Bohemia to endorse their intentions (of course, driven by nationalist ideas) and led the commoners to believe the theatre was also there for them.

3. Celebrations connected with the building of the National Theatre

Since time immemorial, buildings have had their cornerstones and laying such a cornerstone is naturally an opportunity for festivity. The original idea for the National Theatre in Prague was to bring a stone from the Říp hill. That is, from a place closely connected with Czech history

where, according to myths, the first Czechs settled when they arrived in Bohemia in the 6th century¹³. This mythological tale became part of popular literature circulating in the country throughout the 19th century¹⁴, so the nationalist and historical connotations of the whole idea are clear. However, when the ceremonial laying of the stone was getting close in 1868, some voices suddenly demanded to change the concept. In a letter published in a newspaper, someone signed only as “N. N.” from Frenštát, a small submontane town in Moravia, appealed to local politicians to lobby in Prague for the inclusion also of stones from Radhošť and Hostýn as cornerstones¹⁵. Both these places are the most sacred mountains in the country, connected with Saints Cyril and Methodius and the Christianization of Moravia. Like in the case of Říp, the stories and tales connected to Hostýn and Radhošť were part of popular literature¹⁶, and both mountains were also trendy places for significant festivities since at least the 1860s¹⁷. The magnetism and popularity of such sites were enormous, and after N. N.’s appeal, a whole avalanche of cornerstones for the National theatre appeared from other significant locations. So, finally, the building had some twenty cornerstones from all over Bohemia and Moravia. “The people” from the countryside and the popularity of local spots and tales entirely changed the concept set initially by “the elite” for building in the capital. (By the way, all three peaks mentioned above were then depicted in the royal loge of the National Theatre by the painter Julius Mařák.)

A festivity on the hilltop of Říp started the voyage of its cornerstone to Prague. It was transported in a parade of a hundred riders and: (“in all villages on the route; the people competed in celebrating this event; humble villages built triumphal arches and villagers decorated them with banners and garlands [...] The people jostled to the stone, touched it, caressed it and kissed it in tears”) (Fig. 2)¹⁸.

When all the cornerstones arrived in Prague in May 1868, it was time for the main celebration and festival in the city streets. By no coincidence, the date was the 16th of May – the holy day of St. John of Nepomuk. The feast of one of the prominent Bohemian saints was traditionally not only a church celebration but also a great festival¹⁹. Historian Vít Vlnas even states that political elites: (“used common respect for St. John for their purposes. The political calendar counted on the annual deluge of devoted pilgrims to Prague, and all the events that requi-

¹³ Šubert, *Průvodce*, 166.

¹⁴ See, e.g., František Josef Řezáč, *Obraz Zemí Českoslowanských, čili, pohled na vlast Čechů, Moravanů a Slezanů* (Praha: Jaroslav Pospíšil, 1852); Karel Ladislav Zap, *Nový prstonárodní popis Čech, Moravy a Slezka podlé posledního politického a soudního rozdělení, s přídavkem o uherském Slovensku* (Praha: Jaroslav Pospíšil, 1854).

¹⁵ *Moravská orlice*, February 29, 1868, 1.

¹⁶ E.g., Alois Wojtěch Šembera, *Wpád Mongolů do Morawy se starší historií Mongolů, jich powahopisem a popsáním Hostýna* (Hologmouc: Aloysius Škarnicl, 1841); Beneš Method Kulda, *Moravské národní pohádky a pověsti z okolí Rožnovského* (Brno: R. Rohrer, 1853).

¹⁷ Eduard Maur, *Paměť hor: Šumava, Říp, Blaník, Hostýn, Radhošť* (Praha: Havran, 2006).

¹⁸ Šubert, *Průvodce*, 16.

¹⁹ Vít Vlnas, *Jan Nepomucký, česká legenda* (Praha: Mladá fronta, 1993), 227-230.

¹¹ František Adolf Šubert, *Národní divadlo v Praze dějiny jeho i stavba dokončená* (Praha: J. Otto, 1881), 60-71, 92-101, 283-292, 399-459.

¹² František Adolf Šubert, *Průvodce po Národním divadle* (Praha: Družstvo národního divadla, 1883), 50-51.

red masses were held in the half of May”)²⁰. *Those who came to celebrate the laying of the cornerstone crowded the city together with pilgrims; both groups melted.* Of course, there were speeches of leading Czech politicians and personalities, a banquet, opera, and music performances, as well as a regatta on the Vltava River, fireworks, a parade, and a festival on the Letná plain with acrobats, ropewalkers, clowns, dioramas, shooting galleries, menageries, uncovered ballrooms and scores of booths with meals, beer, and wine (Fig. 3)²¹. Seriousness and enthusiasm with which the people took part in the forenoon festivities changed with the last hit of the hammer on the cornerstone into a boisterous joy that, like some electric aura, began to throb in the veins and perk up the minds of all visitors and put them in the mood for piquant popular humour²².



Figure 2. Bohumil Roubalík, Transport of the Cornerstone from Říp through a village. Source: František Adolf Šubert, *Národní divadlo v Praze dějiny jeho i stavba dokončená*, Praha: J. Otto, 1881, p. 165.



Figure 3. Festivity on Letná Plain in 1868. Source: Servác Heller, *Slavnost položení základního kamena k národnímu divadlu*, Praha: Dr. Eduard Grégr, 1869, p. 60.

The grand opening of the National Theatre in September 1881 consisted only of speeches, a banquet,

and plays inside the building, without any broad public festivity, which many people strongly criticised²³. Art Historian Jindřich Vybíral states that (“the Czech public was disillusioned. Instead of a great national celebration, they had a degrading show organised for the high society...”)²⁴. Nevertheless, people gathered in front of the theatre, sang national songs, and greeted notable guests as they got off their coaches²⁵. As popular journalism was rising, several jokes appeared on this topic. One cartoon satirically depicted an old gaffer from the countryside who got lost in the narrow streets of Prague and asked other pedestrians: (“Do you know where that thing, bought for my five kreuzers is?”) (Fig. 4)²⁶. The gaffer is, in fact, a personification of petty donors like Václav Bosák mentioned above. Subsequently, the building burned down in August 1881 during some finishing works, and the reopening on the 18th of November 1883 was again without any public celebrations²⁷.



Figure 4. Caricature of the Gaffer. Source: *Humoristické listy*, 17. 11. 1883, p. 391.

4. Festivities bound with other buildings

Similar festivities like in Prague in 1868 were typical in the Lands of the Bohemian Crown from the 1860s to the First World War. Of course, on a smaller scale. They included parades, decorated houses, costumes, games, fireworks, music, dancing, drinking, food, etc. They were bound to the placing of cornerstones and the grand openings of many buildings, such as schools, town halls, exhibition pavilions or community centres (such as municipal representative buildings, savings banks, buildings of the Sokol gymnastics organisation and mainly

²⁰ Vlnas, *Jan*, 237.

²¹ Šubert, *Průvodce*, 163-184; Jan Bartoš, *Národní divadlo a jeho budovatelé* (Praha: Sbor pro zřízení druhého národního divadla, 1933), 200-224; Jindřich Vybíral, “The Idea to Build the National Theatre and the History of its Realization”, in *Národní divadlo. Historie a současnost budovy*, Zdeňka Benešová et al. (Praha: Národní divadlo, 1999), 95-100; Jindřich Vybíral, “Budování / Building”.

²² Servác Heller, *Slavnost položení základního kamena k národnímu divadlu* (Praha: dr. Eduard Grégr, 1869), 59-63, here p. 59.

²³ Šubert, *Průvodce*, 358.

²⁴ Vybíral, “The Idea...”, 97.

²⁵ Šubert, *Průvodce*, 357-358.

²⁶ *Humoristické listy*, November 17, 1883, 391.

²⁷ Bartoš, *Národní*, 310.

national houses)²⁸. The category of community centres is the most important since these buildings often contained great halls that could also serve as theatres. In the Moravian provincial town of Vyškov (Germ. Wischau), the so-called *Besední dům* (Beseda clubhouse) was built by the local savings bank in 1886 as its seat and as a multifunctional building with the great hall and clubrooms. The grand opening was a mass event:

Soon in the morning, the streets began to be filled with streams of people from the surrounding countryside. Groups from all sides, with the cheerful sound of trumpets or music, entered the hospitable walls of the town, and everywhere there were bustle and noise that foretold that the attendance at the festival would be unprecedented. The spacious square of Vyškov was crowded with many spectators as soon as 8 o'clock²⁹.

During the celebration inside the building, the elite representatives repeatedly highlighted the crucial role of “the people”. However, “the people” dwelt outside, cheered up by the parade³⁰ (Fig. 5).

Both parts of the society had reunited at the garden festival with music, dance and tables with beer and wine³¹.

The town of Prostějov (Germ. Prossnitz), the third largest in Moravia at that time, which aspired to be the main Czech centre for the whole country, opened its *Národní dům* (National House) in 1907. Designed by prominent Prague-based architect Jan Kotěra, it is considered a critical work of modern architecture. There is no need for a detailed description of its opening celebration. However, the building was perceived as (“dedicated to education and upliftment of the people”³², and the city was crowded: (“The streams of audience members were piling up and winding in all directions, the clatter of carriages, everywhere the unusual bustle and noise, unprecedented even in Prostějov. Crowds around the National House, inside as in a hive”)³³.



Figure 5. Adolf Liesbscher, *Festivity of the Grand opening of Besední dům in Vyškov*. Source: *Zlatá Praha*, 30. 6. 1886, p. 521.

As with the National Theatre in Prague, the local “elite” and “the people” were divided. The former was inside the building, while the latter was outside. Nevertheless, what remained essential was the role of the theatre. Michal Ursiny, a professor at the technical university in Brno and vice-president of the National Theatre in Brno, described it very aptly during the celebrations in Prostějov:

Moreover, the dramatic arts have the most direct and influential effect on the human spirit of all the arts. The most ingenious works of architecture, painting, sculpture, and yes, even music usually leave us cold, for they do not affect our minds so immediately, so powerfully, as the living word that comes from the stage. [...] Hence the significant influence of dramatic arts on the broad and less educated classes, on the working people. They understand everything, feel and live with the actor on the stage, laugh, and cry³⁴.

Historian Miroslav Hroch states that many national revival movements through Europe, including the Czechs, desired to upgrade the theatre culture from travelling troupes playing beneath the open sky to professional ensembles and stone buildings³⁵. Interestingly, the first plays at the grand openings in Vyškov, Prostějov, and many other community centres across the Lands of the Bohemian Crown were performed by amateurs. Moreover, the plays were primarily popular pieces like the comedy *K životu* written by Jaroslav Vrchlický (1886) in Prostějov or the historical tragedy *Della Rosa* by Gustav Pflieger Moravský (1861) in Vyškov. Therefore, the fact that amateurs performed popular plays for the local “elite” presents another paradox and example of how categories of popular (or folk) and “high” culture melted together on the local level.

²⁸ In Austria-Hungary (especially in the Czech lands), the national houses were a local variant of clubhouses, serving as community centres with great halls for social events, restaurants, clubrooms, hotel rooms or offices. The communities in the smaller towns (or these towns themselves) did not have enough funds to build theatre buildings solely, so, as a compromise, the multifunctional type of “national house” emerged, suitable also for theatre plays, but with much broader functions. See Jiří Malif, “Vereinshäuser in Brünn und in den national gemischten Städten Mährens vor 1914”, in *Heimstatt en der Nation Ostmitt eleuropäische Vereins- und Gesellschaft shäuser im transnationalen Vergleich*, eds. Peter Haslinger, Heidi Hein-Kircher and Rudolf Jaworski (Marburg: Verlag Herder-Institut, 2013), 13-50; Jan Galeta, National Houses – “Damnatio Memoriae? Architecture and Nationalism at the end of 19th and in 20th Century”, in *Admired as Well As Overlooked Beauty. Contributions to Architecture of Historicism, Art Nouveau, Early Modernism and Traditionalism*, eds. Jan Galeta and Zuzana Ragulová (Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2015), 119-133; Jan Galeta, “National Houses in Moravia and Austrian Silesia before 1914. Architecture and Fine Arts as an Opportunity for the Manifestation of National Allegiance”, *Acta historiae artis Slovenica* 25, no. 2 (2020): 231-247.

²⁹ *Moravská orlice*, July 8, 1886, 1.

³⁰ *Moravská orlice*, July 9, 1886, 1-2.

³¹ *Moravská orlice*, July 10, 1886, 1-2.

³² *Hlasy z Hané*, December 4, 1907, 1.

³³ *Hlasy z Hané*, December 4, 1907, 1.

³⁴ *Hlasy z Hané*, December 4, 1907, 1.

³⁵ Hroch, *Národy*, 207.



Figure 6. *Laying of the cornerstone of Gymnasium in Místek in 1899.* Source: *Světozor*, 21. 4. 1899, p. 286.

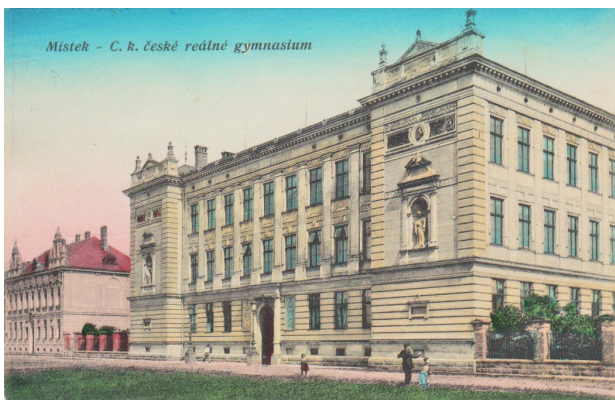


Figure 7. *Gymnasium in Místek, period postcard.* Private collection. Source: Výukový web Marka Šimoňáka, <http://www.simonak.eu>.

The last example is from the provincial town of Místek (Germ. Friedberg) in north-eastern Moravia. The local Germanophone minority dominated the town. When the Czechophone population attempted to establish and erect its grammar school (*Gymnasium*) at the end of the century, they followed the model of the National Theatre³⁶. The private school association (called *Matice školská*) held a public collection, and as the period press put it, the school (“will be sustained by our people from Moravia and Silesia from their hard work”)³⁷. People, associations, and companies donated small sums of money for several years, and the local savings bank also helped. First, the school was founded in 1895, and its new eclectic building was erected in 1899 by Karel Welzl, a pupil of Theophil Hansen. Naturally, its opening was an opportunity for a festivity: (“Czech people from Místek and the surrounding countryside looked forward to this moment from the bottom of their souls”)³⁸. It included a parade, a musical performance of national songs and classics (Smetana, Schuman, or Mendelssohn), notable politicians giving speeches, and

priest consecrating the building. The celebration ended with a buffet and a dance party: (“even in the shadow of the Moon, the audience stays on the fest ground, and sound of songs is carried into the quiet evening”)³⁹. Even opening a school building was an opportunity for a party (Figs. 6, 7).

5. Popular objects accompanying the erections of significant buildings

In the case of Místek *Gymnasium*, the press also mentioned that people purchased commemorative medals during the festivity. Although we do not know what this particular one looked like, we know medals from the National Theatre cornerstone ceremony and its opening, or from the opening of the Czech National House in Vítkovice (Germ. Wittkowitz), church and school in Mariánské Hory (Marienberg), both in Moravia, or the Czech National House in Trutnov (Germ. Trautenau), Bohemia⁴⁰. A newly-erected building is typically depicted on one side, while the other had the date and a symbol (e.g., linden leaves, the crown of St. Wenceslaus, or a ribbon in national colours) or a personification. These medals are a continuation of the tradition of pilgrim badges⁴¹. They were “popular” objects as mass-produced souvenirs, but they were also objects of memory commemorating specific events. Their owners kept them at home, and once in a while, they could look at them and remember what they experienced during the event. Furthermore, such a medal could be worn on a jacket or a dress during other festivities. It was a way to let everybody know that the bearers remember because they were “there” during that unforgettable moment. Medals are also works of art, as artists designed them and a workshop minted them, but this aspect is beyond the topic of this paper⁴² (Fig. 8).

Postcards are another type of souvenir-like object. As mass-produced merchandise and collectables, they are ideal popular objects⁴³. Of course, they rarely played any role in the grand openings, but in some cases, the postcards depict the proposed design of the future building. The postcard with the design of the National House in Prostějov is just one of many examples (Fig. 9).

Intentions of such an image were clear: profit and propagation. In times without television or the internet, in an era when pictures in the newspapers were still rare, postcards were the perfect kind of advertisement. They were a way to spread images and information across long distances and let people know that there was an endeavour to erect the building in question. The larger the number of informed people, the better the chance the

³⁹ *Noviny těšínské*, October 28, 1899, 2.

⁴⁰ Published on the cover of Antonín Just, *Národní dům v Trutnově 1900-2000* (Trutnov: Town of Trutnov, 2001).

⁴¹ See, e.g., Peter Keller ed., *Glaube und Aberglaube: Amulette, Medaillen und Andachtsbildchen* (Salzburg: Dommuseum zu Salzburg, 2010).

⁴² Werner Kitlitschka, “Zur Funktion der historistischen Medaille”, *Der Traum vom Glück die Kunst des Historismus in Europa*, Band 1, ed. Hermann Fillitz (Wien: Künstlerhaus and Akademie der Bildenden Künste, 1997), 257-266.

⁴³ Anett Holzheid, *Das Medium Postkarte. Eine sprachwissenschaftliche und mediengeschichtliche Studie* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 2011).

³⁶ Jan Galeta, “Spolkové a společenské stavby na Moravě a ve Slezsku / Community Buildings in Moravia and Silesia”, in *Síla i budoucnost jest národu národnost / The Strength and Future of the Nation Is National Identity*, ed. Jindřich Vybíral (Praha, UMPRUM, 2021), 408-445.

³⁷ *Noviny Těšínské*, June 6, 1895, 4.

³⁸ *Noviny těšínské*, October 21, 1899, 1-2.

collection would be supported. The same goes for the postcards depicting the erected buildings, which were even more common.



Figure 8. Medals of Cornerstone celebration of the National Theatre in Prague, Opening of the church and school in Mariánské Hory and National House in Vítkovice. Source: Private Collection.



Figure 9. Postcard with the design of the *Národní dům* in Prostějov. Source: Private Collection.

Furthermore, the category of popular media connected to these buildings also includes posters, leaflets, and brochures. These items served as vehicles of ideas and information with mass impact⁴⁴. It is possible to demonstrate this on many examples, but for this purpose, let us stay with the now-familiar town of Místek. When local Czechophone inhabitants opened their National House (*Národní dům*) in 1900, the celebrations consisted of three parts: the gala evening (with speeches, a tableaux

vivant and a theatre play), the national festival (a parade, concert, public presentation of Sokol gymnastic exercise, buffet, various entertainments, and fireworks) and a dance party. For this occasion, the association published a program with all the information, including the entrance fee cost. The leaflet was designed in Art Nouveau typography and was on public display in shops, workshops and inns and distributed to letterboxes (Fig. 10).



Figure 10. Leaflet with the program of opening festivity of *Národní dům* in Místek 1900, State District Archive Frýdek-Místek. Source: *Národní dům* Místek.

Moreover, concerning the Czech *Gymnasium* mentioned above, the school association *Matice školská*, who built and ran it, was so bold that they had pre-printed greeting cards for newly married couples. The text consists of congratulations in verse and a short history of the school. Finally, the *Matice školská* asks that the groom and bride hold a collection at their wedding to benefit the school. A photo of the school building dominated the whole leaflet, so the solemn architecture gives a semblance of solidity.

6. Conclusions

This study aimed to show that some festivities were closely connected to the construction phases (laying of the cornerstone, grand opening) of buildings, and the architecture was thus at their centre. Firstly, the National Theatre in Prague and its festivities were discussed. Subsequently, the paper focused on some other examples of similar festivities connected to a building. The study showed that even some objects of mass production (medals, postcards, or leaflets) were made thanks to ephemeral events. These items and the festivities themselves were not marginal ventures complementing the “high” architecture – quite the opposite. They can extend our interpretation and explanation of the architecture and its period meaning on a new semantic level. It can be said that the festivities and objects explored in this paper are somewhere between the artificially constructed concepts of “high” and “low”, “the elite”, and “the people” and between “folk” and “mass” culture. Following Holt N. Parker’s study, they are on the edge of being or not being “authorised” by the “artworld”

⁴⁴ Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, *A social history of the media: from Gutenberg to the Internet* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

(and other “worlds”)⁴⁵. In his famous work *Popular Culture*, Peter Burke described this blurred area for the early modern era. He states:

It may, for example, be unwise to describe public festivals, whether religious or civic, as ‘popular’ because, on such occasions, different social groups often walked in procession or lined the streets to watch the others. All the same, it may still be helpful to describe some festivals in some places and times as more popular than others or to speak of processes of ‘popularisation’ or ‘aristocratization’⁴⁶.

In modern times of the 19th century, we can speak about “elitization”, but the spheres of “popular” and “elite” were in some cases separated and in others mingled. We can, therefore, consider the festivities as part of popular culture. The elites may be making passionate political or national speeches from the podium, but for whom? Naturally, for the broadest possible audience. The festivity was not held to celebrate a saint or a monarch; religious ceremonies in their innermost essence do not need an external audience; a royal ceremony can theoretically take place within the circle of the court. However, the 19th-century celebrations associated with architecture were held to celebrate a moment, and without people, without an audience, they were not a celebration but just an elite party. That was demonstrated at both openings of the National Theatre in Prague in 1881

and 1883. Festivities like on Letná plain in 1868, or the opening of the Gymnasium in Místek in 1895, where members of “the elite” and “the people” were together as one mass are unique because they deny liminality and social classes – ordinary people are closer to their elite representatives than ever. Furthermore, the buildings in question served as, let us say, “stages” for mass performative acts. They are not only pieces of architecture, examples of “high” art, but living components of popular culture.

Of course, similar festivities connected to architectural monuments are a broader European phenomenon inherent to many national communities⁴⁷. And as the Lands of Bohemian Crown themselves were also inhabited by the Germanophone population (called *Deutschböhmen* and *Deutschmährer*), it is necessary to mention that they too built notable architectural monuments, such as theatres, national houses, gyms, and schools⁴⁸. The town of Liberec (Germ. Reichenberg), considered an unofficial capital of Germans in Bohemia, became a spot of significant festivities during grand openings of German gymnasium (Turnhalle), theatre or new town hall⁴⁹. Although compared with Czech festivities, there were some distinctions – e.g., Germans liked so-called *Fackelzug*, a parade with torches – in general, celebrations of both national communities in the Lands of Bohemian Crown were parallel.

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⁴⁵ Parker, “Toward”, 168-169.

⁴⁶ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 15.

⁴⁷ For a situation in nearby Hungary in the same era, see Bálint Varga, *The Monumental Nation. Magyar Nationalism and Symbolic Politics in Fin-de-siècle Hungary* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2016).

⁴⁸ On this topic see mainly Věra Laštovičková, *Cizí dům? Architektura českých Němců 1848-1891 // Ein fremdes Haus? Die Architektur der Deutschböhmen 1848-1891* (Praha: UMPRUM, 2015), 155-173.

⁴⁹ Jan Galeta, “The Architecture of Bohemian Germans / Architektura českých Němců”, *Síla i budoucnost jest národu národnost / The Strength and Future of the Nation Is National Identity*, ed. Jinfich Vybíral (Praha: UMPRUM 2021), 526-567.

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