



## CZECH AMERICANS AND THEIR AMERICAN INDIAN COLLECTIONS FROM THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY AT THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM\*

### PART 1

Kateřina Klápštová

Vojta Náprstek, founder of the Náprstek Museum, spent the years 1848-1857 in the United States and after returning home to Prague (in 1858), Bohemia (at the time a part of the Austrian Empire) continued to nurture the bond with his fellow countrymen living in America.<sup>1</sup> He did so with extraordinary dedication and sincerity.<sup>2</sup> Náprstek corresponded with the friends he made during his American stay, sending them books and keeping them abreast on the political and cultural news in Bohemia. In turn the expatriates provided him with news of their activities and the conditions and circumstances accompanying these efforts. One such matter was a new Czech library in Caledonia, Wisconsin, that loaned Czech books. Vojta Náprstek donated books while in America and sent others from Bohemia.<sup>3</sup> However, he was most active and developed the most friendships in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. There, from 1850 to 1857, he ran a reading room, a lending library, and a store that sold books and sheet music. In the summer of 1867, Josef Satran, secretary of a Milwaukee association, *Slovanská lípa* (Slavic linden), wrote to Náprstek, who was already in Prague, describing the society's meeting where members praised Náprstek for graciously remembering his countrymen over the ocean and for his tireless educational

---

\* The report has been prepared within the research project of the National Museum: „Personalities of the Czech Science and Culture“ supported by the Czech Ministry of Culture (VVZ 300 MK 00002327202). K. Klápštová is Curator of the Amerindian Collections, Náprstek Museum, Prague, e-mail adress: Klapstova@seznam.cz.

<sup>1</sup> The Náprstek Museum in Prague received its name in 1932, almost forty years after the death of its founder, when the museum's focus was firmly established. Vojta Náprstek, enthusiastic about the industrial and social progress of the Western world, began forming the Czech Industrial Museum in his house, U Halánků. There he amassed and exhibited technical novelty objects and inventions as manifestations of progress in science and technology that would inspire the Czech people. Though he exhibited objects of non-European nations brought in by explorers and expatriates, he viewed them as comparative material. But as these collections grew and their character became increasingly ethnographic, he ended up building a new museum edifice within the complex U Halánků. Its first structure was completed in 1886, and the second was finished after Náprstek's death by Mrs. Náprstek in 1898-1901. The museum building still serves its original purpose. Although the idea of a Czech Industrial Museum went under while Náprstek was still alive, the museum aspect of the institution has been preserved. Today it houses non-European ethnic collections only. The collections are built on a core of exotic artifacts that was acquired with Náprstek's support and backing.

<sup>2</sup> His wife, Josefa, whom he married in 1875, helped him greatly with his correspondence.

<sup>3</sup> See reports by J. V. Sládek in *Národní listy* where he was an editor between 1868 and 1880.



efforts and unbounded support of the Czech nation.<sup>4</sup> For instance, in 1869 Náprstek sent books to Czechs in Cedar Rapids. The packages were accompanied by a note reading, *"Kindly accept my small contribution to you."*<sup>5</sup>

The reopening of the National Theater in Prague in 1885 was an event of great importance.<sup>6</sup> The fact that Czech Americans contributed to it was solely thanks to Vojta Náprstek and his campaign. Among the donors was František Korbel of San Francisco who in 1868 sent to his friend, Vojta Náprstek, one hundred and fifty two dollars that Californian Czechs raised toward the National Theater.<sup>7</sup> He added to the list of donors an extra twenty dollars, asking Náprstek for a subscription to the *Politik* magazine.



Czech Americans on the visit U Halanku in 1885. Photographed by J. Eckert.

<sup>4</sup> A cultural and patriotic-political organization, *Slovanská lípa* (Slavic Linden) was founded in the U.S., in Detroit in 1857, modeled after patriotic associations of the same name, that had been established in the Austrian Empire in Prague and Vienna during the revolutionary year of 1848. Other cities followed and soon every town with a sizable Slavic population had its own *Slovanská lípa*. The Milwaukee branch was started by Vojta Náprstek himself.

<sup>5</sup> Among the books were *The Writings of Božena Němcová*, *The Idea of an Austrian State* by František Palacký, *The Bouquet* by Karel J. Erben, *The Labyrinth of the World* by Comenius, etc.

<sup>6</sup> The National Theater in Prague opened in June 1881 but a blazing fire in August 1881 ravaged the roof, auditorium, and stage. The new National Theater was built thanks to the national fund-raising campaign, with the support of Czech Americans.

<sup>7</sup> František Korbel (1831–1920) graduated from the Prague Technical School and after revolution in 1848 left for political reasons for America. In 1860 he returned to the old country to fetch his younger brothers, Antonín and Josef. Since 1863 all three lived in California where they established a company that made steam saws. They never forgot the country they came from, always supporting Czech national efforts and also Náprstek's Czech Industrial museum. *Světovozor* (1885), No. 28, p. 425



A large group of Czech Americans came in 1885 to witness the opening of the National Theater. One hundred eighty three Czech Americans, mostly from Chicago and New York, signed up for the journey to Prague. Accompanied by massive crowds to bid them farewell, the expatriates boarded the Hamburg steamboat, *Westphalia*, called the "theater ship", and, singing the Czech national anthem set sail on June 1 from New York harbor.<sup>8</sup> In less than two weeks they were given a personal welcome in Hamburg by Vojta Náprstek as the head of the reception committee. On Monday, June 15 around 6 pm the group reached Prague by a special train, greeted by large crowds of Czechs in every city from the border to Prague. At the Prague train station, the expatriates were welcomed by swarms of Prague citizens. The welcome turned into a parade that accompanied them to the National Theater where they were officially greeted by the National Theater's principal, František. A. Šubrt.

The next day, on Tuesday, June 16, they visited the Municipal Hall, were received by Mayor Tomáš Černý and afterward went on to the National Theater. There, in the underground vaults they saw the foundation stones, regarding with teary eyes one that bore a sign, "What links blood together, the ocean cannot sever", donated by the Chicago association, *Slovanská lípa* (Slavic linden) to the National Theater in 1868.

In the afternoon of the same day, the American guests headed to *Betlémské náměstí* to Náprstek's Czech Industrial Museum in the house *U Halánků* (today's Náprstek Museum), decorated by a banner that paraphrased the sign from the foundation stone of the National Theater, "What links hearts together, the ocean cannot sever".<sup>9</sup> The Ladies American Club sang the American Union hymn, *Hail Columbia*, and writer *Sofie Podlipská* gave a welcoming speech emphasizing the love of the expatriates for the old country.<sup>10</sup> The Czech Americans also saw the collections in the Náprstek house, *U Halánků*, where the newest technological inventions were placed next to special exhibit displays of Oriental collections.

An important part of the expatriates' visit was the delivery of gifts they had brought to the Náprstek Museum from America. With that they continued a tradition that began in 1855 when Náprstek, who was then staying in America, launched a great expatriates collection to benefit the old country.<sup>11</sup>

Another part of the visit itinerary included on the same evening a gala performance at the National Theater and later another one as a good-bye, on Monday, June 22.<sup>12</sup> The Czech Americans spent a whole week in Prague and on the day before their June 23

<sup>8</sup> The model of the theater ship, *Westphalia* (H.135 cm, L.150 cm) is housed at the library of the Náprstek Museum.

<sup>9</sup> *Zlatá Praha* Vol.II (1885), No.28, p. 399–400; *Zlatá Praha* Vol.II (1885), No.29, p. 413–414; *Světozor* Vol.XIX (1885), No.28, p. 443–447

<sup>10</sup> The Ladies American Club was an educational and benevolent association of modern women, created in 1865 under Vojta Náprstek's tutelage.

<sup>11</sup> While in America, Náprstek sent to Prague as a gift several crates of books and natural and ethnographic artifacts. He began his collection for the National Museum in 1855, asking Czechs living in America, in person or through letters, to collect artifacts. He entered into correspondence with over 200 Czech Americans. In 1857 he sent to his brother Ferdinand in Prague a gift that contained books and objects for the National Museum. He brought the rest home with him when he returned home in 1858.

<sup>12</sup> They spent Tuesday evening at the National Theater, listening to a rhymed speech by poet Jaroslav Vrchlický, later attending a gala performance of Bedřich Smetana's opera, *The Bartered Bride*. At the final visit to the National Theater on June 23, the opera performed was *Dimitrij* by Antonín Dvořák. *Světozor*, Vol. (1885), No. 28, p. 447.



departure they traveled to Pilsen and to the Karlštejn Castle. When they were returning to America through Hamburg, they received a greeting from Náprstek: *"To everyone on the theater ship we wish a safe return to their new homeland. Cherish the memories that connect us all to the old country, and teach them to your families."* At the end he paraphrased the banner sign: *"What links languages together, the ocean cannot sever."*

In the late nineteenth century, more groups of Czech Americans visited Prague. Although they did so on official occasions, a visit to the house U Halánků was always one of the key events that was never skipped. Náprstek's house U Halánků became, among other things, the expatriates' information center for their Prague schedule, and a place to meet each other or hold discussion with Mr. Náprstek.

One of the visiting Czech Americans described the impact the house and the hospitality of its residents had on him and his fellow countrymen. Unfortunately his name is unknown but from a newspaper scrapbook gathered by Vojta Náprstek and archived by the Náprstek Museum comes this quotation, recorded in its Czech original:

*The Visit at U Halánků.*<sup>13</sup>

*"Every American who travels the world to gain knowledge of life in foreign places and, while crossing Europe, happens to visit the Bohemian capital will undoubtedly encounter a former American citizen whose soul might still be a part of America: Mr. Vojta Náprstek. In his great house called U Halánků, the tourist will find America spread before him with all its special features. Why then be surprised that whenever a Czech American comes to Prague, he makes a beeline for Mr. Náprstek as he would for an old friend? ... The celebrated council of the city of Prague, aware of our relationship to Mr. Náprstek, named this gentleman, along with the mayoral deputy, Mr. Vališ, a part of the welcoming committee. As mentioned above, we had the occasion to meet him shortly after our arrival in Hamburg. On the second afternoon in our hometown of Prague, we visited the house "U Halánků" and were honored to meet the lovely Mrs. Náprstek who welcomed us as warmly as if we were children returning to their parents...*

*"Not just Prague but all Bohemia has got a zealous and tireless caretaker in the person of Mr. Vojta Náprstek who not only watches in so many ways over the progress and prosperity of industry but is mindful of other aspects important to society as well; namely its philanthropic institutions... As is known, the rooms of the house U Halánků hold an industrial museum, ample library, and a reading room that also serves as the main gathering place of the Ladies American Club. We saw all these things. Throughout our stay not a day went by without us meeting there – like going to a shrine to receive a blessing.... What a sweet place... filled with greenery, flowers, flags, welcome banners and arches of triumph. All together it had to make a wonderful impression on the visitors."*

A distinguished group of Czech Americans journeyed to Prague in 1887 to take part in the second Sokol festival. But the government banned it and the organization put on a smaller sporting event, in which the American Sokols participated. Náprstek also helped with organizing this trip.

Another group traveled to Prague in 1891 for the Czech Jubilee Exhibit, held at the Prague fairgrounds at Letná in Královská obora from May 15 till October 18. The travelers had left Chicago on June 3, and picked up seventeen more fellow countrymen in

---

<sup>13</sup> The clip is not dated but based on the stated dates it can be assumed that it refers to the visit of Czech Americans in 1885.



Cleveland and five in New York. The ship sailed from New York harbor on June 6 and the group arrived in Prague on June 22. The welcoming committee of city councilmen and Prague mayor, J. Šolc, was headed by Mr. Vojta Náprstek, book publisher J. Otto, chairman of the Central Matic prof. J. Čelakovský, and others. A visit to the Náprstek Museum was already a tradition. During this visit, on Wednesday, June 24 the delegate of the American Matic and the publisher of the Chicago Paper, J. V. Matějka, called Náprstek the "father of all Czech Americans". Náprstek received his guests in a salon that had a library and that also served as the meeting place for The Ladies American Club.<sup>14</sup> He then gave his friends a tour through the museum, had the court photographer Eckert take a picture of him with the group, and then proceeded to serve the visitors refreshments that included Czech pies and wine. Around twelve o'clock, the expatriates left to sightsee other Prague landmarks. The Prague media reported that the event of the day was an evening bash at the Měšťanská beseda, where the chairman of the American Matica, J. V. Matějka, delivered a cash gift of 1,700 guildens to the Ústřední matica školská. There was also the visit to the National Theater on Friday, and Saturday, June 27 was the day of the Matica gala.<sup>15</sup>

The gifts of the expatriates are recorded in the accession catalogs of the Náprstek Museum. The presents can be divided into two general categories. The first one includes technological novelties intended to enhance Náprstek's Czech Industrial Museum. For instance, the American Sokol expatriates in 1887 tried to bring truly original artifacts: *a two-handle razor, straw fan, corn-cob pipe, piece of wire used on fences at pasture enclosures to prevent livestock from escaping, wire gadget that could be made into a flowerpot holder, egg basket, bouquet stand, small model of pull-down draperies, patented appliance for fastening buttons, two cuff links inlaid with real gold, model of an American sash window, model of an American single house, white wooden pail for water, scissors for cleaning a petrolatum wick, metal drill, etc.*<sup>16</sup>

The second section contains Indian collections that would represent America and enrich the museum's exotic collections. The expatriates kept up the avid collecting that Náprstek began twenty some years ago in America.<sup>17</sup> They must have known about his interest in collecting because aside from the Indian collections, which were in majority, they also occasionally brought objects originally from China or Oceania.

Among the donors of indigenous artifacts was František Korbek and his wife Anna. Taking several family members with them, they visited in 1889 Prague and Náprstek's house U Halánků, and then visited again by themselves in 1892.<sup>18</sup> Among the nameless donors are the Czechs of Omaha and Detroit Ladies, whose gifts are recorded but not given an exact date; thus it can only be surmised that they come from the 1880s.<sup>19</sup>

A prime example is the collection by Pavel Černoušek (he changed the spelling of his name in America to Chernoušek) of Hutchinson, Minnesota.<sup>20</sup> Chernoušek have been on

<sup>14</sup> cf. note <sup>10</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Světozor Vol. XXV (1891), No. 28.

<sup>16</sup> The old accession catalogues of the

<sup>17</sup> cf. note <sup>11</sup>

<sup>18</sup> In 1887 the Korbek brothers were among the Czech American tour-group donors, bringing in technological objects. Cf. note <sup>7</sup>

<sup>19</sup> cf. note <sup>16</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Pavel Černoušek/Chernoušek (1846–1893) fled for America in 1866, probably trying to avoid military duty. The dates of his birth and death were kindly given to this article's author by his great-grandson, Steve Chernousek who lives in Ohio, USA (many thanks to Ing Marie Borská for serving as the intermediary).



the trip the Czech expatriates took to Bohemia in 1880 (December 16). One of his travel companions was Geringer, a Chicago publisher. Although she did not accompany them, Chernoušek's wife Barbora in her book briefly described the visit:<sup>21</sup>

*"My husband's longtime wish was finally fulfilled when an expedition of Czech Americans to the old country was organized. In those days, many had to face obstacles, especially those who left for America as youths trying to avoid the military. Thus the Austrian police easily captured my husband as soon as he landed in Prague. But this aggression was quickly checked since he was already an American citizen and as such telegraphed the American consulate..., which liberated him from the clutches of the Austrian bloodhounds. He was especially warmly received at the Náprstek household. Mr. Vojta prepared him a joyous welcome and was indeed pleased by the gifts my husband brought for his museum. Reportedly he was flushed with happiness as each present came out of its wrapping, especially the relics of an Indian chief known as Rocky Bear. My husband's likeness was then added to an album of Czech Americans... Mr. Náprstek also gave him his own portrait signed, "For Pavel Chernoušek, in remembrance of our visit"..... In Prague (he Chernoušek) bought fifty dollars' worth of books for our libraries. Mr. Geringer of Chicago also purchased many books on the theater... Finally, my husband said good bye to Mr. Náprstek and thanked his wife for her hospitality. Mr. Náprstek asked him to convey his salute to free-spirited America... Then my husband went to advise the consul of his upcoming departure. To be safe, the good consul accompanied him to the train station telling him on the way about the frequency with which his fellow countrymen seek his help against the wrongdoings of the zealous Austrian bloodhounds... At the train station waited several gentlemen and Mr. Náprstek introduced him to them and they all gave him souvenirs. Naturally, he was surprised and moved by their kindness, he thanked them and bid them all farewell when the conductor asked him to board the train that was about to leave. My husband waved, and all that was left of Prague was a memory."*

Pavel Chernoušek's collection is not large but it does represent one time and one region of Minnesota. The donor identified all its parts as being of the same ethnic origin. Pavel Chernoušek probably did not take much interest in Minnesota's native people and didn't give detailed information on their tribal affiliation, saying only that all the objects are of Dakota origin. Unfortunately he left no information on how he actually acquired the pieces and did not mention if any object belonged to Rocky Bear who is cited in the aforementioned memoir by Chernoušek's wife, Barbora Černoušková-Kajrová. However, the artifacts that P. Chernoušek collected do seem to fit their Dakota or Santee Sioux classification.

František and Anna Korbel's, Korbel brothers' and the other Czech American's collections aren't self contained as Pavel Chernoušek's set. They comes from different regions of Native America and even partially from another continents. Following catalogue contains Chernoušek's collection and selected pieces from Plains, Praries and Woodlands of the others Czech American's.

*To be continued in Annals of the Náprstek Museum 29/2008.*

---

<sup>21</sup> Barbora Černoušková-Kajrová (Chernoušek), born Kajrová: „V staré a nové domovině“ [Inside the Old Country and the New Homeland] was published at the author's expense by Josef Šeří in Beroun. (many thanks to Ing Marie Borská for lending)