



AMERICAN CZECHS AND THE COLLECTIONS OF  
THE NÁPRSTEK LIBRARY

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The first historically documented Czech who settled on the North American continent for good was Augustin Heřman - and this was in the 1630's. Like many before him and many after him, he had probably been forced to leave his native land because of his religious convictions. In the 19th century we also find ever more people who sought refuge in America because of their political opinions. The most well-known of these is indubitably Vojtěch Fingerhut - Náprstek. Even though he spent only ten years of exile in America, this stay influenced him for life; after his return to Bohemia and till the end of his days, his labour and joy were cultural work and adult education activities in which he elucidated and endeared things American as exemplary to all Czechs, and particularly to the citizens of Prague. This is still borne out eloquently by the stock and collections of the library and museum into which his house was finally turned (The Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures.)

Vojta Náprstek (1826-1894), originally Fingerhut in German, had been an enthusiastic Czech patriot since his student days and a great book-lover. When threatened with persecution after the defeat of Prague's 1848 revolution, he fled to the United States of America, where one of his plans was to establish the first Czech countrymen colony in the USA consisting

of political immigrants. But reality did not come up to his expectations, there were not that many „Men of '48“ and anyway, they had dispersed all over the continent. Náprstek remained in New York with his lady-friend and a handful of other countrymen. He made his living in all sorts of ways, but after two years he decided to settle in the town of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he used the money his mother sent him to open a book store and library. During his well nigh ten year's stay in the USA he also became publisher of the satirical periodical *Milwaukee-Flugblätter*, notary public for the State of Wisconsin, he participated in the peace talks with the Dakota Indians, worked in the presidential campaign for the Republican candidate J. Fremont, was deeply interested in matters concerning the abolition of slavery. And of course he used every opportunity to meet immigrants from the Czech Lands, helping them in their difficult beginnings with the aid and advice he based on his own experiences; he exhorted them to establish their own societies and publish newspapers and periodicals. He personally initiated the founding of such support associations as *Slovanská lípa* (the Slav Linden-Tree) where „the motherland, education and friendly social diversions“ were to be cultivated.

Náprstek did not give up his activities for American countrymen even after his return to Prague in 1858. He kept up a wide correspondence, helped provide books for countrymen libraries, sent money, contact addresses and anything that was needed. When the Czech countrymen heard in 1862 that he wanted to establish an industrial museum in Prague, they answered his call with enthusiasm and by 1863 he had dozens of exhibits from the USA, which he showed in Prague at the Industrial Exhibition together with other interesting exhibits.

The American countrymen's reaction was similar when they heard that Náprstek was building up a library and archive, which he wanted to open to the public. They sent him books, photographs, countrymen association memorabilia and of course also the first Czech publications. This founded the basis of a unique countrymen library, which still fascinate us with its great number of items and also the uninterrupted continuity of new arrivals. Nowadays it is a much sought-after source for research, with material that contains items like prints sent by countrymen from all over the world, from the 1850's till the present. The countrymen's library is a popular haunt for students and laymen alike, but also for Czech and foreign experts. They are enticed here by things as unique as the first Czech publication to be printed in the USA (Constitution of Laws and Regulati-

ons, printed by the Czech-Slav company in St. Louis) dated 1854, which is the only copy that exists; or another treasure - the first Czech magazines in the USA, of 1860. Vojta Náprstek kept up contacts not only with the individuals who enriched his library collection with chance gifts, but also with publishers, who sent him examples of their whole production - like August Geringer of Chicago, Jan Rosický of Omaha or Antonín Novák of Milwaukee.

In addition to the large collection of monographs, the library of the Náprstek Museum now owns over 300 titles of countrymen periodicals, with as many as two thousand volumes in each set. This collection is the largest in the Czech Republic and offers a wide view of the scope of countrymen publications all over the world. Most abundantly represented are again the United States of America, the 19th century issues being particularly valuable. The very oldest are *Slavan Amerikánský* (The American Slav), *Národní noviny* (National Newspaper), *Slavie*, *Zvony* (Bells), *Pozor* (Attention), *Pokrok* (Progress), *Národní noviny II* (National Newspaper II), *Slovan Americký* (The American Slav), *Amerikán* and others, which all started publication in the 1860'. Among the later ones - and these are still exceedingly sought-after by research workers, is *Pokrok západu* (Progress in the West), *Svornost* (Concord), *Duch času* (Spirit of the Times), *Dennice novověku* (New Age Daily), *Květy Americké* (American Blossoms), *New Yorské listy* (The New York Paper), *Hospodář* (The Farmer), *Šotek* (the Imp), *Spravedlnost* (Justice) and others. We must mention that the Náprstek Museum library does not have all these titles in complete sets, so should an opportunity arise - the museum would be grateful for the missing copies.

Náprstek's personal correspondence, which is deposited in the family archive, is also somewhat unique. As nearly all the pioneers of Czech journalism on the American continent were his friends, his correspondence with Jan Borecký, Vojta Mašek, František Mráček, Karel Jonáš, Václav Šnajder, František B. Zdrůbek and many others (forming the majority of this collection) presents a very important source for gaining knowledge about Czech-American journalism.

In addition to the library, the museum also has a very extensive Countryman Archive, as it is called, which consists mostly of private and official correspondence with countrymen and their associations and societies, but there are also diaries, autograph books, association letters and documents, identity cards, posters, brochures, programmes, invitations, visiting cards, manuscripts, flags, badges, medals, photographs and drawings.

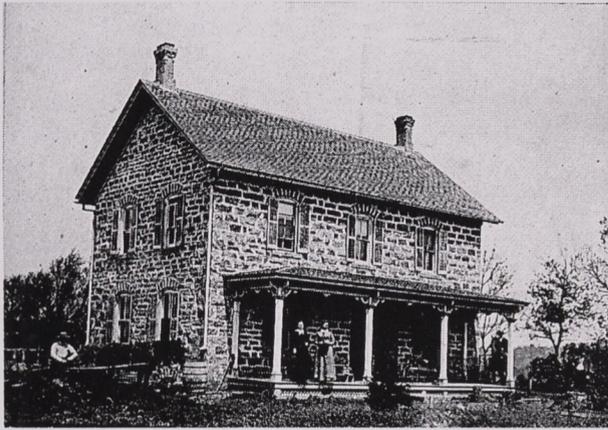
Vojta Náprstek knew that a library should be able to offer the broadest possible scope of information, in word and in image, which is why he established a special collection of photographs and stereoscopic pictures. Both these collections contain portraits of famous personalities, pictures of places all over the world, landscapes, cultural monuments, interiors etc. - all genres taken between the 1850's and the outbreak of World War 2. The photograph collection has over 30 000 units, the collection of stereoscopes over 10 000. The fact that there are also photographs of our countrymen, their portraits, their houses (from the first durmast cabins right up to luxurious villas), stores, factories and plants, but also snaps from their private lives or their social activities in the countrymen associations, makes this collection not only extremely interesting but also immensely valuable for the study of Czech emigration to the USA.

The photographs show how these Czechs lived in America, and also document their visits to their old country, because personal contacts with our countrymen were becoming ever more frequent towards the turn of the century. In addition to individual private visits, when our American countrymen always stopped in at the Náprstek house U Halánků, large groups arrived for the "Sokol Slet" events, the Provincial Exhibition (1891), the Czech-Slav Ethnographical Exhibition (1895). Czech teachers, trainers, etc. also paid frequent visits to their „old country“. It was noted at the time that no countryman would pass through Prague without spending at least half a day at the Náprstek's in Bethlehem Square. They were welcomed at the door with a motto „What links the heart cannot be rent asunder by the ocean“ and the kindly smile of Mr. Náprstek, called „the American“ or „Honorary consul of the American Czechs“ by those living in the vicinity. Visitors could inspect the Náprstek library and the countrymen publications, records and gifts. The master or mistress of the house saw to it, that all guests sign their name into the visitors' book and, if possible, add where they came from, when they left for America and maybe some further personal data. Although not all the visitors went into detail about the course their lives had taken, even so the visitors' book is now an engrossing source of facts about the history of the Czechs who lived in the United States of America.

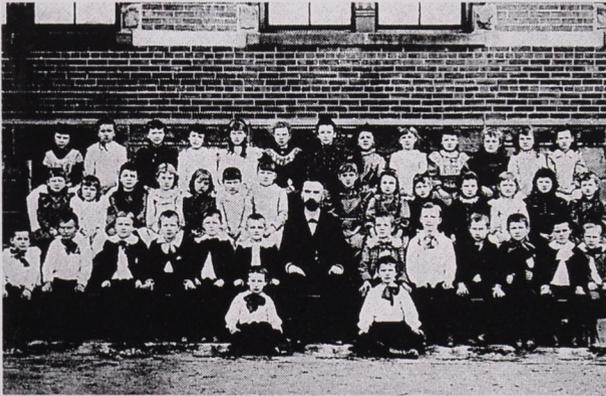
Another significant source of information is the stock of scrap-books containing articles and news-reports from Czech and German newspapers and periodicals, from about the 1850's till 1905. Relating to the countrymen are also sets like America (4 volumes), American Czechs



*The house of a Czech farmer. Crete, Nebraska 1865.*



*A Czech farm near New Prague. Minnesota.*



*Czech Sunday - School students in Cleveland. Ohio 1894.*



*Jan Klaus's General Store. Chicago, Illinois.*



*Czech Church and parsonage of the Protestant Reform Church „Zion“ in Colfax, Nebraska.*

Help Czechs in the Czech Lands Afflicted by Hailstorm (4 volumes), Czechs Living Out of Their Old Country (17 volumes were moved to the Countrymen's Archive), Jonáš Karel (2 volumes), Pacák Ludvík (7 volumes), biographies (22 volumes), and others.

Further interesting material can be found in the graphic art collection - for example old plans and site drawings, maps and also pictures, gifts from American Czechs. The gifts to be found in other library departments, e.g. postcards, tourist guide books and posters are definitely not negligible either. The poster collection has a large number of posters of various kinds from America. There is still a stock of posters awaiting classification - posters announcing theatre performances, concerts, celebrations, balls and sports events that were organised by the countrymen associations.

As Vojta Náprstek had such a deep personal bond with the United States through the many friends he had there, the majority of the publications and archive material concerns the Czechs in America. The 19th century is represented to the greatest detail. Contacts with the USA continued after Náprstek's death but they became impersonal and also less frequent. The largest number of gifts to the countrymen archive and library are also those presented by the Czechoslovak Institute Abroad in the 1930's.

The Náprstek Museum keeps up contacts with some of the countrymen periodicals and centres to this very day. The correspondence now mostly concerns the sending of periodicals. Just as in the days of its founder, even now the countrymen's library and archive are supplemented and updated only due to the understanding and kindness of Czechs living abroad, who, with their contributions to this unique countrymen's museum, keep up a tradition that began in the mid-19th century.