



Milena Secká<sup>1</sup>

## In Personal Remembrance of Dr. Milena Secká

(14 July 1957 – 14 March 2021)

Before I started working at the Náprstek Museum in 2008, I knew Dr. Milena Secká as the co-author of the book *Ženy rodiny Náprstkovy* (Women of the Náprstek Family) and from the conferences held between 2005 and 2006 at which she presented papers on the American Ladies' Club (hereafter ALC) and its members. At the time, I perceived her mainly as a tireless promoter of the ALC and associated her exclusively with the Náprstek Museum. I was not aware of her work at the Institute of Ethnology at the time.

We met briefly during the founding of the Zdenka Braunerová Salon, which was established at the Central Bohemian Museum in Roztoky near Prague. I even accompanied her to its inaugural meeting. It happened by complete coincidence, basically by mistake. The meeting of the membership of the future Salon was arranged in some vestibule of the metro from where we were to proceed together to the place of the first meeting. But there was a change of plans, and all of the members except for Dr. Secká and myself met a little earlier and left to found the Salon. So when I arrived at the meeting place in the metro, only Dr. Secká was waiting. Everything was quickly explained and together we went to meet the others.

At the Salon meeting, Dr. Secká shared her experiences with the renewal of the ALC. She described the difficulties which preceded or were connected with its activities. She warned, for example, that the initial enthusiasm could soon fade, and therefore it was necessary to take great care of the membership base, a sort of 'healthy core of members', without which it would be otherwise difficult to accomplish anything and sooner or later stagnation would occur. The ALC therefore followed the principle of accepting new members only on the recommendation of at least two existing members.<sup>2</sup> This avoided formal membership by people who perceived it as a kind of prestige but did not actually participate in the club's activities. Perhaps because of this rule, the revived ALC has functioned continuously and is still active today, although its restorer is no longer with us.

There was talk about all kinds of things, especially about Zdenka Braunerová herself and her mother Augusta, but also about other remarkable female personalities of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On that occasion, Dr. Secká mentioned the scrapbooks dealing with women's issues which are deposited in the Náprstek Museum. She reminded us that they were almost unknown, unresearched, and underappreciated historical sources. Would I have ever imagined then that I would soon join the Náprstek Museum and have responsibility for, among other things, this unique collection of scrapbooks.

In 2008, an advertisement was published that the Náprstek Museum was searching for an archivist. I came to apply and was welcomed by Dr. Secká, with whom I had

1 Photo: Jiří Vaněk.

2 This rule has been respected since the founding of the ALC in 1865. See Secká, *Americký klub dam. Krůček k ženské vzdělanosti*, 2012, p. 23.

an initial interview. She showed me the historic interior of the library and the archive storeroom in the next building. She was the head of the Library of the Náprstek Museum at the time, and since the archive was part of it, she became my supervisor for several years. I had the opportunity to get to know her not only as a supervisor or a colleague, but also as a person.

Dr. Secká's office was adjacent to mine and was the last interconnecting room of the library. From there one could walk into the historic interior of the ALC reading room and then through a small room to the neighbouring museum building. Her desk stood to the right and under the window. It was almost completely covered with various books, papers, notes, etc. Often on her desk there was an assortment of thimbles (*'náprstek'* in Czech) which Dr. Secká had collected and which her colleagues and friends had brought her from their holidays or trips. She also had a small table with a computer behind her. There was about as much space on it as on her desk. The only 'unoccupied' space was a small rectangle in the middle, which was completely filled by the keyboard. Most of the scripts for exhibitions, scholarly texts, and lectures were created here. When she was not writing, Dr. Secká carefully covered the keyboard with a scarf.

Upon entering the office, a sign on the opposite wall read: 'Visitors are requested not to linger.' It dated back to the time of Náprstek and was far from the only object that reminded one of the renowned era of Náprstek's Czech Industrial Museum and its famous library. In the office, classical music, which Dr. Secká liked very much, was played softly yet almost constantly. It was not only a backdrop for her work, but she also actively devoted time to it, singing in a choir, and when her health did not allow it later, she liked to attend its performances at least as a member of the audience.

I frequently passed through her office on my way to and from the storeroom, often several times a day. Even more often, I would come to ask questions, consult, or just to boast about something interesting I had just discovered in the archives. Despite the sign mentioned above, Dr. Secká always encouraged me to sit down. There was never an occasion when she dismissed me; she always found time and never failed to listen to me. If it were a longer conversation, we sat at a round table in the middle of the room where she also received various visitors. They were many – colleagues, ALC members, students, etc. Dr. Secká was very sociable and maintained many different personal and professional contacts which she did not hesitate to share with other colleagues at the Náprstek Museum. This opened up unprecedented opportunities for professional cooperation, publications, lectures, and also presentations in the media, especially Czech Radio. She was able to connect and introduce people to each other who probably would have never met under any other circumstances.

Dr. Secká was undoubtedly one of the most prominent experts at the Náprstek Museum, and she possessed a natural authority not only in the library, but I think throughout the entire National Museum. As a supervisor, Dr. Secká was very tolerant and benevolent, and she was able to firmly hold together and secure the collective not only in the library, but in the entire Náprstek Museum. She was not in the true sense of the word a museum curator or librarian, as her potential lay somewhere else, and it is a pity that the museum has been able to use it only to a very limited extent, especially in the last decade. She was an experienced museum professional, she organized countless successful exhibitions, and she had fresh, original ideas which she did not hesitate to share with others. Many a colleague sought her advice in solving professional and personal problems. She had admirable insight, vital wisdom, and a rare gift for solving

problems, without delving into them as far as unnecessarily. She was not self-centred in her professional or academic activities, but rather very selfless, which is not always a commonplace principle in museums. She wished others success when it was deserved and was able to appreciate the efforts of younger colleagues and to support them both in their own field and beyond it. She was also able to make light of a situation, often finding humour in it as well as a parallel to a particular scene from her favourite vintage films, from which she oftentimes quoted. She had an extraordinary gift for selecting and truthfully representing the important and essential matters from out a mass of information, as it is clearly seen in her professional work, in designing exhibitions, writing scholarly texts, or lecturing.

Dr. Secká enjoyed writing, and it was seemingly easy for her to find interesting topics to which she paid attention and which she introduced to the public through articles or papers. During her tenure at the Náprstek Museum, she gained an admirable overview of archival sources and the collection of the Library of the Náprstek Museum, and her bibliography is therefore extremely rich. I believe that the publication devoted to Vojta Náprstek, *Vojta Náprstek: vlastenec, sběratel, mecenáš* (Vojta Náprstek: Patriot, Collector, Benefactor), was a milestone in her professional life. It was her first independent monograph in which she had an exceptional opportunity to summarize her own long-standing research on this personality, the fates of other people connected with the house *U Halánků*, and the history of the Náprstek Museum. She supplemented the text of the book with incredibly rich and often unpublished pictorial materials. For her, the publication of this monograph meant the fulfilment of a lifelong dream, coming at just the right time. She had her first bout of cancer and the complications associated with the difficult treatment. Working on this publication, but especially its completion and publication, was a great boost and encouragement for her. She later told me that it was a gift from Vyšehrad (publishing house) for her.

Even when new difficulties, complications, or limitations arose, Dr. Secká faced them with extraordinary courage. She was relentless; after the aforementioned monograph on Vojta Náprstek, she published other monographs in addition to scholarly and popularising articles. In 2012, *Americký klub dam: Krůček k ženské vzdělanosti* (The American Ladies' Club: A Step Towards Women's Education), in which she presented a gallery of more than 400 portraits of female members of the ALC from the collection of historical photographs she managed. Two years later, she made the extremely interesting and moving writings of Josefa Náprstková available to the public in the form of a critical edition, and two years later she dedicated a separate monograph to Josefa titled *Jen Náprstková, prosím... Neobyčejný život v dobových pramenech* (Just Náprstková, Please... Extraordinary Life in Contemporary Sources).

She always tried to be useful and relevant to the museum. She did not discuss her health too much; from time to time the illness would present itself, but it always receded again after a while. However, even during periods of really serious health difficulties, she tried to work and was committed to giving her all. When we spoke during one of her hospitalizations, she mentioned, for example, that she had articles already thought-out and was looking forward to being able to write them. She even had stationery brought to the hospital so that she could take notes.<sup>3</sup> I confess that I did not have much

3 Namely for Secká, How Many New Asylums Do We Need for the Imbeciles? Náprstek's Nurturing of Philanthropy, *Annals of the Náprstek Museum*, 42(2), 2021.

understanding of her attitude, not least because I believed and still believe today that the museum could have and should have provided her with better working conditions. But Dr. Secká never complained, since she was too much of a *grande dame* for that. During her incapacity, she managed to complete the text of a biography depicting the remarkable life of Ferdinand 'Ferda' Náprstek, *Ferdinand Pravoslav Náprstek, labužník života* (Ferdinand Pravoslav Náprstek, Gourmet of Life), but unfortunately she never saw the publication of her last work.

I do not think she ever considered herself a scholar in today's sense of the word. It did not matter to her whether she published in an impact journal or regional anthology, whether she lectured at an international conference or in a nursing home. She was not writing for 'journal impact factor' points. Her texts, lectures, and exhibitions were characterized by the fact that they could engage, educate, and entertain everyone. She could lecture in the historic hall of the Old Town Hall about Vojta Náprstek's activities to the Prague City Council or lecture about the ghosts of Old Prague wearing the costume of a White Lady during the Night of Museums,<sup>4</sup> and it was always a rewarding experience and a sincere pleasure to listen to her. Her texts could be read by an erudite scholar as well as by an ordinary person. She herself once told me that the aim and purpose of her work was primarily education and popularization. I would add 'in the best sense of the word'. In addition to numerous articles, publications, and exhibitions, she regularly commemorated various anniversaries of important people or events associated with the museum. She was also one of the most active lecturers at the Náprstek Museum. Lecturing activities generally stand somewhat in the background of professional activities and tend to be underestimated. Dr. Secká liked to lecture and approached these presentations honestly and responsibly. She did not use the same presentation twice and always tried to present something fresh and new. If anyone has been instrumental in preserving the living legacy of Vojta Náprstek in recent decades, it was certainly Dr. Secká.

She was as devoted as few others have ever been not only to the Náprstek Museum, but also to the National Museum. I believe that this was partly due to the sophistication of the environment in which she grew up and also due to her patriotism, which was not merely an empty concept for her. It was also related to a certain old-fashioned and persisting influence, which she was always proud to profess. She often emphasized the patriotism of the personalities she wrote or spoke about and its influence on their lives and decisions. During one of her lectures at the memorial plaque of Vojta Náprstek on the occasion of his anniversary, she mentioned Náprstek's tremendous efforts to uplift Czech society, his lifelong goal, the roots of which can be traced back to his studies and which he gradually tried to fulfil throughout his life, despite various obstacles and difficulties, with greater or lesser success. She then posed an important rhetorical question: 'What motivations are driving today's young students when they consider their future vocation and life mission?'

Dr. Milena Secká was the soul of the Náprstek Museum, and for me she also embodied a sort of imaginary link or connecting member between the former Náprstek's house *U Halánků* and its Czech Industrial Museum and the present Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures. She opened for me the imaginary door of the house *U Halánků* and involved me in the scholarly research. Over time, we collaborated

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4 See Secká, *Strážidla a tajemné síly kolem Náprstkova muzea v Praze*, 2012.

more, had joint outputs, or mutually reviewed our publications. If I were to mention everything she had ever helped me with, it would be an extensive list and probably even incomprehensible to unfamiliar persons. And who knows whether I know about everything myself, because she quite naturally considered her help as a given. Even when I tried to remind her of her help, she usually did not even remember it herself or graciously waved it aside. I respected her as a scholar, but so much more as a person.

Martin Šámal