



VOJTA NÁPRSTEK - HIS MUSEUM AND LIBRARY

Milena Secká

Vojta Náprstek was born at *Uhelný trh* (Coal Market) in central Prague, in April 1826. However, he spent most of his life (except the first few months and, later on, a period of nine years in the U.S.A.) in a different place: namely, at *U Halánků*, a house located in *Betlémské náměstí* (*Bethlehem Square*). He obtained basic education at St. Aegidius' School, from where he proceeded to Prague's *Akademické gymnasium*, a grammar school whose then head was the linguist Josef Jungmann. In 1846 Náprstek graduated from grammar school and intended to enrol in a course at the Vienna University. He was particularly attracted to lectures conducted there by the renowned Orientalist August Pfitzmayer, which corresponded with his aspiration to learn about foreign countries, their languages and cultures. Unfortunately, his practically minded mother meant otherwise, and so Vojta Náprstek embarked on law studies. Even so, he did combine the legal curriculum with Professor Pfitzmayer's lectures on China, as well as studying the Armenian language, and becoming actively involved in the work of Vienna's Slavic students association. In March of the revolutionary year 1848, Náprstek addressed meetings of Viennese students, raising demands for the freedom of the press, and took part in street battles on the barricades. In the autumn of that year the revolution was suppressed and, following a hazardous journey to Hamburg, Náprstek embarked on a journey to the United States.

America became a great school for Náprstek's subsequent life. During his initial years there, he worked as a labourer. Then, upon receiving financial assistance from his mother, he settled in Milwaukee, where he

started a book shop. For four years he edited a satirical magazine, *Milwaukee Flugblätter*, catering chiefly to the Milwaukee German-speaking community. Once again, Vojta Náprstek became actively involved in the local cultural and political life. He experienced a cultural shock during a visit to a slave market; visited the Dakota Indian tribe with a U.S. government delegation; and spent most of his time bringing together Czech immigrants who were then beginning to arrive in America. Náprstek helped them to form associations, supplied them with Czech-language books, and encouraged them to publish their own periodicals.



J. Bauše, *U Halánků* house, Prague.

In 1858 Vojta Náprstek's mother, Anna Náprstková, succeeded in obtaining an amnesty for her son who was then able to return to Prague. There, backed by experience, erudition, practical orientation and organizational skills, he promptly found a good deal of space for action, turning

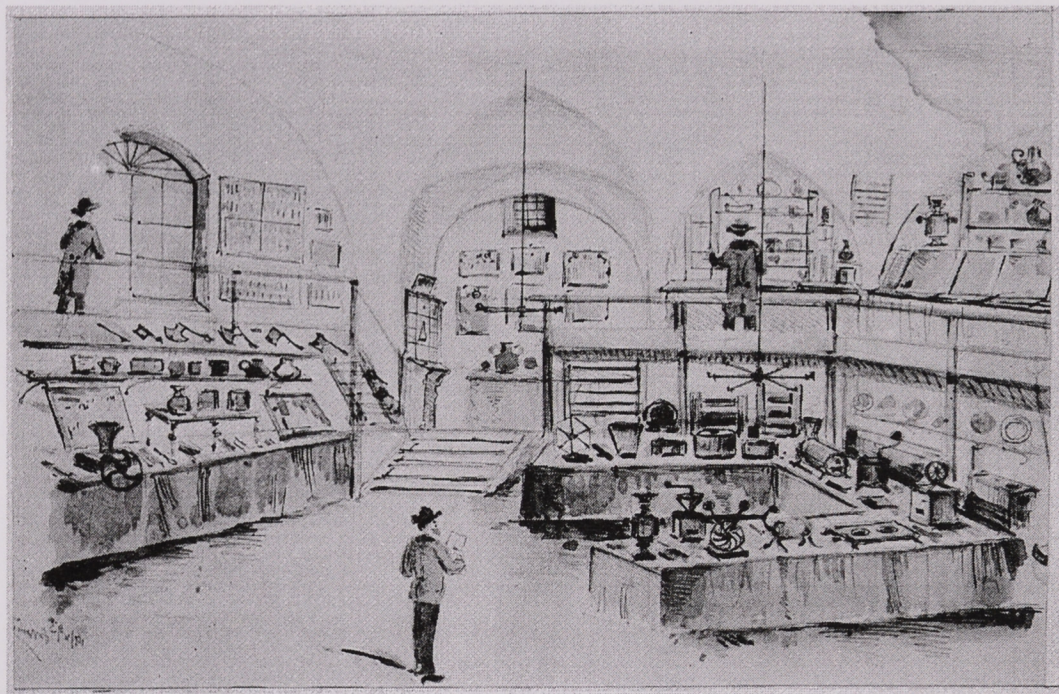
the old family residence *U Halánků* to a major gathering place for leading Czech intellectuals of the time. It served as the venue of friendly parties whose guests included František Palacký, František Ladislav Rieger, Jan Evangelista Purkyně, Eduard Grégr, Miroslav Tyrš, Božena Němcová, Karolina Světlá, Jan Neruda, Jaroslav Vrchlický, Julius Zeyer and other protagonists of the Czech cultural and political scene.

Náprstek's public activities were dominated by his interest in social problems whose solution he saw in his nation's full emancipation from outdated feudal ideology and transition to democracy. In this respect, he was a typical representative of his generation, with its overwhelming emphasis on cultural education. Hence also Náprstek's lifelong dedication to the diffusion of new discoveries in the fields of science, technology and culture.

His first successful major project was the founding of the Czech Industrial Museum, an institution geared to the promotion of technical development. Náprstek had brought the idea of establishing the museum from America. The chief impulse came in 1862, during Náprstek's visit to the World Exhibition and the Science Museum in London. After his return to Prague, he organized the first industrial exhibition at Prague's *Sřelecký ostrov*, staging a display of, most notably, kitchen appliances, including a gas stove, a food mixer, an icebox, a washing machine, a wringing machine, an iron, a sewing machine and other instruments used in cooking and household work. The exhibits from the show were then deposited at Náprstek's house *U Halánků*. The founding of an industrial museum was a pioneering feat, as at that time similar institutions existed only in several Western European countries. Especially in its initial years, the role played by the Czech Industrial Museum was all the more important as it paved the way for modern industry by offering explicit demonstrations of the practical and social functions of new industrial equipment.

Not only was the house *U Halánků* a meeting place of Czech politicians and artists; it was likewise frequented by Czech explorers. Emil Holub, Enrique Stanko Vráz, Josef Kořenský, Otakar Feistmantel, Pavel Durdík and many others found in Vojta Náprstek a keen sponsor ever ready to support their projects. Returning to Prague from their expeditions, they would regularly come to visit the house *U Halánků*, bringing with them rare ethnographic collections, as an expression of gratitude for Náprstek's moral and material support. In due time, these ethnographic items came to constitute the body of the collections held by the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures. Their core was formed by gifts from Czech explorers and expatriates, most particu-

larly those from the U.S.A. In the 1880s Vojta Náprstek had a three-storey extension built to the house *U Halánků*, which he turned to a museum and a major cultural centre attracting visitors by a permanent industrial and ethnographic display, as well as by a programme of short-term exhibitions.

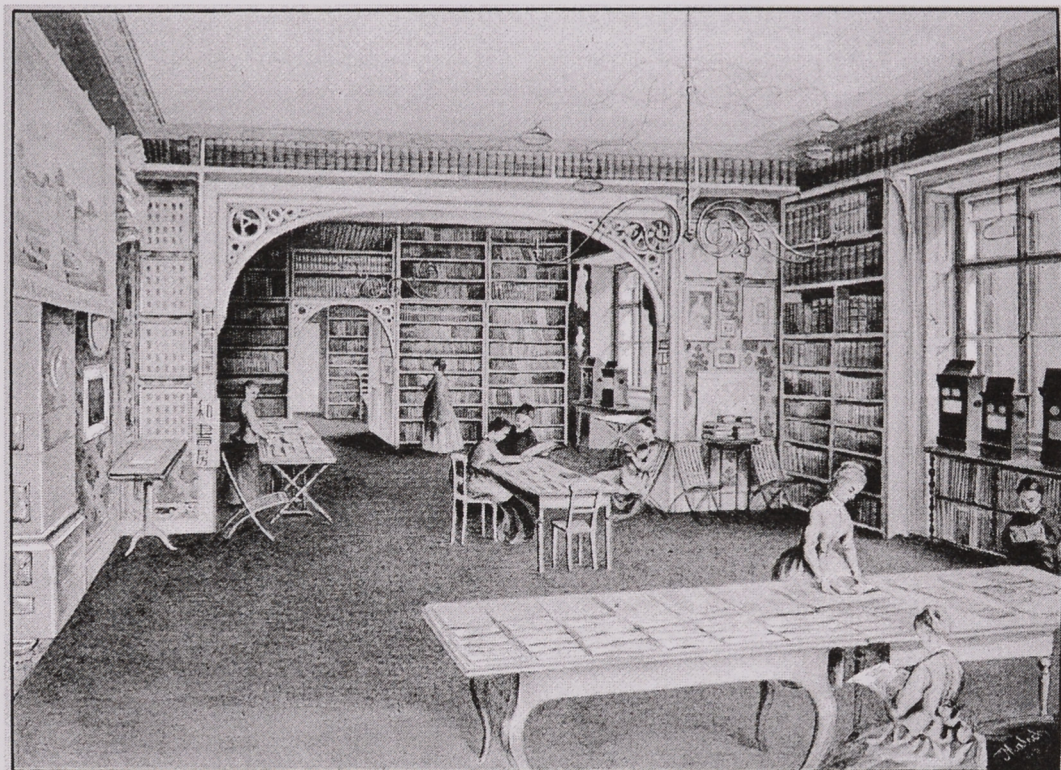


J. Bauše, The First Exhibition of Vojta Náprstek's Czech Industrial Museum.

Simultaneously with the museum, a library was opened for the general public. Náprstek regarded educational activity involving books as an important driving force of human progress. After his return from America, he enlarged the library he had built in his student years and made it accessible to his friends and to members of the American Ladies' Club. In 1865 Náprstek had initiated the founding of the Czech lands' first women's association which was named the American Ladies' Club, and to which he apportioned two large rooms in the house *U Halánků*. These rooms then also served as the Náprstek Library's lecture hall. In building up his library, Vojta Náprstek drew on the latest international trends in the field. In terms of organizational structure, it represented a thoroughly unique private institution.

Vojta Náprstek, a great philanthropist and democrat, died on September 2, 1894. However, the museum and library which he set up have continued to serve the public to this day.

The library represents a repository of information in a number of languages, provided not just in the form of books and journals, but also through a sizeable body of photographs, stereoscopes, prints and scrapbooks.



Čítárna Amerického klubu Dám 1865..1875.
Reading Room of the American Club of Bohemian Ladies Prague.

J. Maloch, The Reading Room of the American Ladies' Club.

The fact that after his return from America Vojta Náprstek maintained steady contacts with the Czech expatriate community in the U.S. greatly contributed to the library's acquisition of an extensive corpus of expatriate publications, many of which have as a result survived only in Prague. Today these publications and other forms of printed matter constitute a separate section operating under the heading of Expatriates Library. It has been continuously complemented, and in terms of both tradition

and size has no peer in Central Europe. The core of Vojta Náprstek's original library has been preserved in vintage condition that has not changed since the 1950s. It contains a total of 62,000 volumes, including old prints and incunabula. Since the 1950s the museum has evolved another section, the Specialist Library which has concentrated on gathering publications related to the fields of study within the Náprstek Museum's scholarly scope.

The Náprstek Museum Library thus fulfils the legacy of its founder, providing its visitors with a wide range of information embracing the domains of non-European ethnography, Oriental studies, Egyptology and numismatics, as well as life of the Czech expatriate communities and the life and work of Vojta Náprstek.