



ANNOTATION

Martin Šámal

Jsem svobodný...: Edice rodinné korespondence Vojty Náprstka 1848–1858
[I am Free...: Edition of Vojta Náprstek's Family Correspondence 1848–1858]
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Milena Secká

Correspondence forms an extensive part of Vojta Náprstek's personal papers, consisting of many thousands of letters, correspondence cards, postcards, telegrams, business cards with scribbled notes and drafts of his replies. It illustrates the life of Vojta Náprstek himself, as well as those of his family, friends and the Náprstek Museum employees. Martin Šámal selected a relatively short period of ten years, which, as it turns out, was the most crucial and interesting for Náprstek's further life and activity. It concerns the time Náprstek spent in the United States of America, far away from his family.

The edition is preceded with a comprehensive introductory study which offers a detailed account of Náprstek's activities in the years prior to the period in question in order to provide the readers with better understanding. Thus, it throws some light on the various consequences and conditions which formed Náprstek's views, and the events which led to his decision to emigrate.

Several studies have been dedicated to Náprstek's stay in the USA; the first reports came out immediately after his death and the next appeared in the 1950's. As the former regime did not approve of Náprstek as a promotor of the anglophone world, he received no scholarly attention. Martin Šámal could only build on Zdeněk Šolle's studies, which, however, have a number of limitations. Most notably, the availability of study material. Náprstek's family archive had not been compiled yet (not until the 2nd half of the 1990's) and thus the author was left with only those sources provided for him by the chief librarian. Likewise, the foreign fonds were to a large extent unavailable. Hence, Martin Šámal seized the opportunity to work with the recently compiled fonds. Moreover, the use of electronic media nowadays facilitates communication with overseas institutions, something the researchers twenty and more years ago could not have imagined in their wildest dreams.

One of the merits of this text, thus, lies in its complexity. For his edition and the introductory study, the author used the local as well as the foreign sources exhaustively. Although new sources may be discovered in the future, they will surely not be that “revolutionary” so as to change Šámal’s hypotheses. Thorough knowledge of the studied period and its “social climate” proves to be inevitable for a critical edition.

Another benefit of Šámal’s study is the courage to go beyond the ideal picture of Vojta Náprstek and offer an honest account of an archivist accurately interpreting the facts found in the available sources, stripped out of the popular clichés. The image of Vojta Náprstek, a great patriot, benefactor and inspirator of many societies, friend “with a big heart” and, most of all, founder of Czech Industrial Museum, who dedicated all his efforts to the well-being of his nation – such was the slightly idealized image presented in Náprstek’s obituaries, which was adopted and spread after his death by Náprstek’s wife Josefa. She considered herself a protectress of Náprstek’s legacy and as such she often uncritically dismissed all insinuations which would spoil the ideal image of her late husband.

Martin Šámal thoroughly examines the sources and discovers an image of a sensitive young man with romantic ideas crushed by the cruel reality, who gets on the verge of collapse. However, his stay in America did not break him; it made him stronger. The preserved correspondence thus makes it possible to look inside the head of the main protagonist and his family, which does not deal with any of the patriotic ideals Náprstek departed with, but the harsh reality of material poverty. As the author of the study rightly puts it, the readers are presented with plastic images of all their writers, even though their correspondence is stylized to a certain extent. Although the collected correspondence from 1848–1858 is not complete, it represents an excellent source of the psychology of the involved characters, and, given the appeal of their setting, they form a unique source illustrating the phenomenon of emigration. With regard to the date of its origin and the scope, this fond is quite rare in the Czech environment.

The third virtue of this study is the expert transcript of the whole convolute in its full scope. Martin Šámal chose to process a unique fond, which has so far been rarely cited in scholarly papers. The scholars must have been deterred by the frequency of German passages as well as the poorly legible handwriting of some of the writers. Thanks to Šámal’s effort, this part of correspondence becomes accessible not only to scholars, but also to the public.

As was mentioned above, the study follows Náprstek’s activities in great detail, focusing mainly on his American stay. Here, I would like to offer a small recommendation regarding Náprstek’s sole successful project – the collection of gifts for the National Museum. This extensive project provided the National Museum in Prague with several hundreds of items (amounting to 350 books and 800 pieces of newspapers, for example). Therefore, I would recommend the author to include into his text at least the number of the acquired exhibits donated by individuals (among other also by Katinka Aigner) as well as different societies. Moreover, Náprstek himself regarded this event as worthy of mentioning in his request for acquiring an Austrian passport, as Martin Šámal rightly states. The high number of donated items can only confirm the effect Náprstek’s challenge had had.

The author complements the text with an editor’s note, an extensive overview of used sources and literature and the indexes of places and names. Of utmost interest is also the pictorial supplement. As was suggested above, Martin Šámal processes materials which, to a large extent, have not yet been published and which will surely inspire another wave of research and serve many of those interested in the history of the 19th century. The texts are thoroughly and clearly transcribed and, quite conveniently, the letters written in German contain, along with their German transcript, also a Czech translation.