

A FEW WORDS

ABOUT THE CREATION, ESTABLISHMENT AND LIFE OF THE LEARNED SOCIETY OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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Learned societies have a long tradition in the area comprising present-day Czech Republic: since the 18th century, they were formed, existed side-by-side, disappeared, and then were created anew. Substantial changes in their history in this country occurred both after 1948 and almost half a century later, after 1989. The Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (CSAS) at the time of its establishment in 1952 encompassed both an ensemble of research institutes and also a learned society. Two older learned societies were, regrettably, abolished at that time: the Royal Bohemian Society of Learning and the Hlávka's Bohemian Academy of the Sciences and the Arts. CSAS declared that it would assume their functions. The second revolutionary change occurred in 1990, when the Commission for Managing the Academy Institutions attempted to remedy conditions within the Academy of Sciences, including complications associated with the entire assembly of members and corresponding members. Simultaneously with the dissolution of CSFR, this body, which resisted being reformed by the decent means of the newly emerging democracy, was abolished. The dissolution of the group of academicians initiated the establishment of the Foundation for Renewal of the Activities of the Learned Society and which subsequently led to the establishment of the Learned Society of the Czech Republic (LS CR).

These remarks briefly describe the history and the initial years of this society and include a concise mention of the societies that preceded The Czech Learned Society. The text consists in the personal comments and memories of the author and is not the work of a historian.

A FEW WORDS OF INTRODUCTION

Learned Societies had been established in France, Italy, England and Germany during the 17th century. The French Academy¹, the Royal Society in London², the Accademia dei Lincei³ in Italy and Akademie Leopoldina in Halle an der Saale⁴ are amongst the oldest on the Continent. The first learned society established in our lands (and not insignificantly the first in the lands of the Czech Crown, but in the entire Austro-Hungarian monarchy) was the *Societas eruditorum incognitorum* in Olomouc in Moravia established December 15, 1746, its abbreviated name being *Societas incognitorum*.^{5,6} Although it was abolished relatively early, its importance is indisputable. A private learned society established in Prague around 1773 was converted into the Bohemian Society of Learning with the consent of Josef II. (1784). Seven years later, it began to use the name

that has remained popular and recognised - the Royal Bohemian Society of Learning (1791). It was abolished 160 years later, in the middle of the 20th century. What a pity! When attempts were being made to renew the learned society at the beginning of the 1990s, Professor Otto Wichterle favoured renewing its historical name.

Following establishment of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in 1952, professional institutions began to be created and, simultaneously, a learned society was created in the form of a collective of members of the Academy (academicians) and corresponding members. At the beginning, in 1952 and for several subsequent years, this group had the character of a true learned society, because of the professional level of its members, even though at that time about 10 per cent of the members consisted of individuals who obtained membership through their association with political power and not based on any special scientific achievement. Under the conditions of a brutal dictatorship, this society could, of course, not function as a learned society in the free world. Towards the end of its existence in the nineteen eighties, the regime had so contaminated the group of academicians that its abolishment after the collapse of communism was actually a liberating act⁷. It should be pointed out that this is the only such instance in countries of the former Soviet empire. On the one hand, there can be no doubt that the Czechoslovak version of the communist dictatorship was amongst the harshest and most dogmatic (increasingly evident in the composition of this group); for example, many Polish and Hungarian colleagues, who lived under milder forms of communism, admired the act of the post-November administration of CSAS and were sorry that nothing similar had taken place at the proper moment in their own countries.

Following the fall of the regime in 1989, it was apparent right from the beginning that it would be desirable to attempt to re-establish the learned society, of course in accordance with the principles that are common in democratic countries. A commission was established, headed by Professor M. Katětov who, however, did not manage to carry out any significant acts in the turbulent post-November 1989 times. Even the drawing up of lists of conceivable candidates was not without problems.

It was stated in the resolution of an extraordinary general meeting of the members of CSAS, held on December 21, 1989, that the previous Presidium of CSAS resigned on December 6, 1989 and that a Chamber of elected representatives of the institutions of CSAS was constituted. Amongst other things, the fourteen-member Commission for preparation of the new legal form of the Academy was requested to separate a learned society (a group of academicians) from research workplaces and to preserve the learned society as a federal entity.

Resolution 49 of the General Session of CSAS on June 28, 1990 is an excellent document which accurately records the resolution and enthusiasm with which the Academy set out on the road to transformation. Under the item on completion

of the new legal form of the Academy (point 2), the Presidium was required to „complete the preparation of a draft law for the Federal Assembly on a learned society of foremost Czech and Slovak scientists“. It is also apparent from the Resolution that the spontaneous purging of politically tainted members of the Academy was not progressing satisfactorily and that the only realistic solution was through its fundamental discontinuous reconstruction. For these reasons, representatives of CSAS were also appointed to a National Commission for the preparation of membership in the Academy of Sciences of CSFR.

Further developments are described in detail in the work by M. Šmidák⁸. The professional group that was to complete preparation of the Federal law on the Learned Society of CSFR was created at the beginning of 1991 and headed by the Vice-Premier of the Federal Government J. Mikloško. Work progressed so well that the principles of the law could be presented to the Federal Government in March 1992. However, due to a great number of legislative tasks the law was not included in the deliberations for the 1990-1992 period; following the June elections in 1992, the imminent disintegration of Czechoslovakia completely obscured other activities. Thus, the draft law on the learned society ended up in the archives of the former Federal Assembly⁸. These unfortunate developments meant that, to the best of my knowledge, the group that was to contribute to nomination of members for the renewed Learned Society did not make any significant efforts in this respect. At the end of 1992, the President of CSAS, Professor O. Wichterle, notified academicians and corresponding members that CSAS was abolished as of December 31, 1992 and that membership in the Academy was also terminated as of that date. Payment of the allowance connected with membership was stopped even prior to this time.

CREATION OF THE LEARNED SOCIETY

During my occasional meetings with Professor Wichterle, he always took the time to discuss what should be done in the future with a „learned society“. During the year, either he or I invited our individual colleagues to debates on this subject. In the second half of 1991, more or less spontaneous meetings were convened by the physicist J. Bičák, mathematician J. Kurzweil, medical doctor V. Schreiber, historian F. Šmahel and chemists O. Wichterle and R. Zahradník and, somewhat later, also the philosopher L. Hejdánek, who questioned the mechanism of renewal of the learned society and on the manner of selecting its members. These meetings were most frequently held at the J. Heyrovský Institute of Physical Chemistry and Electrochemistry and were also attended by other colleagues, some for a short time, others permanently. Obviously, the majority of these meetings was devoted to discussions of current problems of science and education at that time; however, renewal of the LS was also always on the agenda. The subject matter and goals of activities of the intended society were identi-

cal to the subject and goals of our predecessors in the 18th and 19th centuries (which were broadened to encompass aspects specific for the 20th century), as well as learned societies abroad. This was not difficult. However, two other aspects were far more complicated - how to bring the new society to life and how to select its initial members, and choosing a name for the new society.

The idea that we discussed at the end of 1992 concentrated on the possibility of asking the head of the state to name the first 15 or 20 members of the Learned Society. At the beginning of 1993, after I was elected President of Academy of sciences of the Czech republic (AS CR), it was possible to submit such a query to the President of the Republic during my „inauguration audience“. The atmosphere of the meeting was very pleasant; it was also strengthened by the fact that the President Václav Havel had skied with the then Vice-President of AS CR, Helena Illnerová, when he was a child. V. Havel clearly sympathized with attempts to renew the Learned Society and was prepared to name the first members; however, during the debate, he mentioned his fears that he might appear as an absolutist monarch if he were to do so. He recommended that we immediately take steps so that the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament would adopt what he repeatedly called a „One-sentence law“ that would allow him to take such a step.

It seemed from various indications that a Government initiative could significantly contribute to the passage of such a law by the Chamber of Deputies. A pleasant debate with then Prime Minister V. Klaus in the unofficial environment of the Ambassador Hotel, on the occasion of celebration of the Slovakian national holiday at the end of August 1993, strengthened this idea. On this occasion, I was able to continue a conversation with the Chairperson of the Chamber of Deputies, M. Uhde. After some time, however, the Prime Minister made it apparent that he was not in favour of the increasing number of „little laws“ and suggested that we find some other means. This was actually carried out in that we had already applied for registration of the Foundation for Renewal of the Learned Society in the Czech Republic. This was the result of various considerations of the best way to proceed.

We submitted our application for registration of the Foundation to the District Authority in Prague 8, because this city ward was the seat of the Foundation, at the J. Heyrovský Institute of Physical Chemistry and Electrochemistry. We obtained a certificate of registration dated December 14, 1992. At this point I will cite two of the nine Articles of the Statute to clarify the function of this Foundation:

1. A group of twenty-two members (hereinafter called founding members) of the Czech intelligentsia (whose names are attached at the end of this Statute), who consider themselves to be a free and open civic initiative, have decided to establish a foundation.
2. The founding members of the Foundation do so in order that Czech scientific life shall have a unifying element and so that it is based on its own needs and not external, predetermined targets: the purpose of the Founda-

tion is to support scientific life in the Czech Republic. In these efforts, the founding members are continuing in the tradition of the Royal Bohemian Society of Learning and analogous societies abroad. In this way, they wish to follow the pathways pointed out by the patrons of Czech science, headed by the founder of the Bohemian Academy of the Sciences and the Arts, Josef Hlávka. Consequently, they will also look for the support of the Czech state and representatives of public life at the domestic and international levels, from whom we expect effective assistance.

The seven-member-administrative committee of the Foundation consisted of J. Bičák, C. Höschl, H. Illnerová, Z. Lojda, V. Urfus, O. Wichterle and R. Zahradník; R. Zahradník was elected chairperson. In conclusion, Article 9 states: „The Foundation is created for a specific period of time. It shall be abolished on the establishment of a learned society, which will be founded on the initiative of the members of the Foundation“.

Following adoption of the declaration on establishment of the Learned Society of the Czech Republic (see below), it seemed suitable and useful to members of the Foundation not to abolish the original Foundation, but to convert it into a “Foundation to Support the LS in the Czech Republic”; this required a change in Articles 2 and 9 and supplementing the original Article 5 of the Foundation. The District Authority in Prague 8 accepted this change on July 18, 1994. Finally, at the beginning of 1996, the last modifications were made to the Statute in accordance with the promulgation of Act No. 509/1991 Coll., the Articles of the Foundation were drawn up and, since that time, the Foundation has acted under the revised name Foundation to Support Science under the Learned Society.

At the beginning of 1994, we saw no reason to delay establishing the society. By that time, a decision had already been made on the name of the society. Somewhat more extensive information would be required to explain how this happened. Obviously, it was necessary to make a harmonious decision on the naming of two institutions. I won't deny that my sympathies were with completely changing the name of the CSAS group of research institutes and thus leaving the name „Academy“ as an option for the learned society. However, I didn't find much support amongst my colleagues in the Academy; in fact, most directors of institutes felt that CSAS has a good reputation internationally, especially in the area of the natural sciences (which was certainly true) and it is not a good idea to change the name of such a „firm“. I expected that the Prime Minister might spontaneously support my recommendation of a change in the name. However, this did not happen; he also thought that it would be best to keep the name Academy for the group of research workplaces. And thus the name Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic was introduced after the splitting up of the so-called “Velvet Divorce” with the CSFR. Thus, the name Czech Learned Society followed naturally and agreeably with all present for the learned society.

The Learned Society was actually founded in May of 1994. Here, I would like to quote my introductory remarks in the work⁶: „On May 19, at a celebratory meeting in the Prague Carolinum, attended by the Minister of Education, Youth and Sports, I. Pilip, and the Rector of Charles University, Professor K. Malý, the Learned Society of the Czech Republic was founded and received its first recognition in an audience with the President of CR at Prague Castle on May 25, 1994. This society acknowledges the traditions of the Royal Bohemian Society of Learning and the Bohemian Academy of the Sciences and the Arts and will follow in this spirit. Its program does not differ in any way from the program of learned societies in other countries. It consists in support for education, science and a cultural atmosphere, not only in the Czech Republic, but also in contacts between states and nations. The Society has qualities that facilitate this activity: it associates scientists without regard to institution and brings humanists and natural scientists closer together. It is something that is highly desirable for successful functioning of human society in the 21st century. The extremely rapid development of industry in connection with the knowledge and applicability of mathematics, computer science, physics, chemistry and the bio-disciplines has and will continue to have an ever-increasing effect, which is not always favourable, on the human psyche. Consequently, the health and prosperity of human society in the 21st century cannot be conceived without increasing the interconnection of sociology, psychology, ethics and philosophy with the natural sciences and mathematics.“

THE LIFE OF THE LEARNED SOCIETY

The functioning of the society is controlled by its Statutes. Some points are sufficiently informative, so that it is better to quote them than to try to describe them in abbreviated form. The first five articles are related to founding the registered office, and the goals and characters of the members. This is stated more explicitly as follows:

1. Participants of the meeting held on May 19, 1994 in the Prague Carolinum decided to establish a civic association bearing the name Learned Society of the Czech Republic. They expressed their will in the „Declaration of the Learned Society of the Czech Republic“, which was affirmed at this meeting and confirmed by the signatures of those present. In the same manner, participants at this meeting expressed their will during an audience with the President of the Republic on May 25, 1994.
2. The registered office of the Learned Society of the Czech Republic is the Secretariat of the Society, Národní třída 3, Prague 1. The name Czech Learned Society shall be used in an international context.
3. The goal of the Learned Society of the Czech Republic (hereinafter the Society) is to encourage free practice of science, to awaken the thirst for knowledge and delight in knowledge, to disseminate scientific knowledge

within society, and to promote an improvement in the level of education and creative, rational and humanly responsible climate in the Czech Republic. The Society promotes thinking and actions exceeding the boundaries of individual fields. It encourages an approach in which scientific knowledge contributes to effective and qualified viewpoints and decisions in the public life of this country in harmony with the important position of learned societies in all developed countries.

4. The Society is an association of important scientists. There shall be two kinds of membership in the Society: regular and honorary. Membership shall be based on a member's significant and creative contribution to science, openness and integrity. In exceptional cases, a recognised person who has made extraordinary contributions to the dissemination of scientific values in society may become a member of the Society. Regular members of the Society are in general scientists active in the territory of CR. Elected foreign scientists may become honorary members of the Society.
5. The number of members of the Society is not predefined; the number of members under 65 years of age is limited by the number 50 (fifty). The number of honorary members is not limited.

The other Articles are related to the rights and obligations of the members and election of new members. The general meeting is the highest body of the Society and is called by the chairperson, usually once a year. The executive body of the Learned Society is its Council, consisting of the Chairperson of the Society, the Vice-Chairperson and five members. The Council is elected by the general meeting for two years; one person may hold this position for a maximum of two subsequent periods. Finally, the annual contribution of members of the Society equals 1 percent of their net annual incomes and, for pensioners, 0.5 percent of their net annual incomes.

Regular activities of the Society include working meetings (every third Tuesday in a month, with the exception of July and August, from 3 to 5 p.m.); the Council of the Society meets for consultations prior to the plenary meeting. In the introductory part of the plenary meeting, the Chairperson (frequently with members of the Council) discusses the resolutions and proposals of the Council. Since 1994, the main feature of the program has been a lecture by a member of the Society, usually 45-60 minutes long, generally related to his/her professional work⁹. Subsequent discussions are usually very successful. Occasionally, persons who are not members of the Society are requested to give lectures. It is very unfortunate that the Society has not managed to publish these lectures in the form of proceedings; however, they have appeared individually in various journals. Since the autumn of 1996, medallions honouring important deceased scientists have formed part of these meetings; these frequently consist in the life histories of local learned persons¹⁰. The Council meetings also frequently include discussions about various initiatives. Approximately four times annually, public lec-

tures are presented by members of LS, usually with a large public participation. Finally, once annually, in May, a two-day general meeting is held, with participation by guests in the program of the first day: these include representatives of political life, scientists being awarded honours by the Society, representatives of companies sponsoring prizes awarded by the Society, other guests and journalists. In addition, a series of lectures focussed on a specific subject is frequently presented on the first day. Only members of the Society attend the second day, where they hear a report of the Chairperson on activities in the past year and discussions and activities usual for the annual meetings of most societies are held. The election of new members constitutes an important moment.

Two evenings each year are devoted to the reinforcement of a good atmosphere and the cultivation of friendly contacts; here, the members of the Society meet in the presence of their partners. One of these meetings is connected with the May General Meeting and other is held during Advent.

Since 1996, the Society has awarded prizes for important scientific works, a prize for juniors (to age 35 years) and a prize for seniors. The financial sum connected with these prizes is derived from sponsor donations, with contributions from industrial companies and businesses¹¹. Two years later, another prize was introduced, a prize for academic secondary school students¹²: „In 1998-2001, over 100 students from all the academic secondary schools in CR participated in this competition, 36 of whom obtained prizes. The prizes recognise excellent scientific activities in the fields of the natural sciences and the humanities“. We attribute great importance to this prize.

From the beginning, the Society was conceived as a homogeneous society, in an attempt to overcome the barriers separating the natural sciences and humanities. This was always important; however, at a time of increasing consilience¹³, this was an extremely important requirement. In an attempt to increase the intensity of the work of LS, we have recently come to the conclusion that the existence of sections is again topical. However, general subjects will continue to be discussed at plenary meetings. There was another factor that played an important role at the time when LS CR was *in statu nascendi*. The professional capabilities, renown and moral integrity of a candidate are decisive for membership in LS CR. Consequently, the standpoint of uniform geographical and professional representation was always intentionally overlooked.

On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of founding of LS CR, a medal with the name „Medal of the Learned Society of the Czech Republic“ was established, to be awarded to scientists from the Czech Republic and abroad for extraordinary scientific results or life-long scientific work.

The position of LS CR in the Czech Republic is not what it could be. This is due primarily to insufficient activity of the Society in areas of interest to Czech society or parts of it. Some constructive activities were not completed because of an unrealistic hope to achieve complete agreement, i. e., unanimity. This causes

difficulties in the intellectual environment, and not only in this country. We should attempt to try to agree that, say, 75 or 80 per cent support of the members is sufficient for issuing a public or targeted statement by LS CR. However, in all fairness, it is necessary to state that interest on the part of political representatives is less than in all the countries neighbouring on CR. For illustration, it can be pointed out that *dozens* of top representatives of political life, including the President and all living ex-Presidents, attend the General Meeting of the Austrian Academy. And that is not all: in a great many countries of Europe, the executive and legislative bodies utilize the intellectual potential of members of learned societies to arrive at a qualified decision. This is not yet true in this country. One can hope that the wish to contribute knowledge to society will be successful in this country, and that things will change. When this happens LS CR will cease to be the only Learned Society in Europe that does not receive financial assistance from the state and, in addition, the representatives of executive and legislative power will be increasingly interested in the opinions and recommendations of professionals in the Learned Society of the Czech Republic.

Footnotes and references:

1. Founded by Cardinal Richelieu and confirmed by a Decree of Louis XIII in 1635.
2. Founded in 1660; the first meeting was held in 1663.
3. Founded by Duke F. Cesi in Rome in 1603.
4. Founded by a medical doctor Bausch in Schweinfurt in 1652.
5. A very good essay by Professor J. Petrůň of 1977 was published in ref. 6 (pp. 11-24) under the title "History of the Tradition of Learned Societies".
6. Brochure on the activities of the Learned Society of the Czech Republic. Ed. J. Grygar, Internal Press, Prague, 2002, 65 pp.
7. R. Zahradník, page 4 in ref. 6.
8. M. Šmidák: Work from the History of the Academy of Sciences. *Studia historiae Academiae Scientiarum*. Ser. A, Fasc. 5, Prague 1997.
9. Pages 37-41 in ref. 6.
10. Pages 42-43 in ref. 6.
11. Page 56 in ref. 6.
12. Page 32 in ref. 6.
13. E. O. Wilson: *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge. On the necessity of unifying the natural and humanitarian sciences*. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, U.S.A., Random House of Canada Ltd., Toronto, 1998. "The greatest enterprise of the mind has always been and always will be the attempted linkage of science and the humanities." (E. O. Wilson in interview, *Los Angeles Times*, 9 July 1998)