

The Estates Theatre to the Nation!

HOW THE ESTATES THEATRE BECAME
PART OF THE NATIONAL THEATRE

Introduction

In 1783 a theatre was opened in Prague whose founder entitled it "Graflich Nostitz'sches Nationaltheater" and which later – when in 1798 it became through purchase the property of the provincial estates – took on its present name of the Estates Theatre (Stavovské divadlo). Plays put on there were in German and at first the operas were mainly sung in Italian, but soon Czech companies began to produce their own performances in their native language too. With their increasing activity there also increased the audacity of their plans and so in the middle of the 19th century the target was set of establishing an independent Czech national theatre in Prague.

This intention was realised in stages: in 1862 with the opening of the smaller Temporary Theatre (Prozatímní divadlo) and in the course of the next two decades with the building of the monumental National Theatre according to the projects of Josef Zíték. With the opening of plays in the Temporary Theatre it was decided by a resolution of the Provincial Parliament (with the express agreement of the Czech deputies also) that the Estates Theatre would serve in future exclusively for the production of German plays. But already shortly after the opening of the National Theatre (1881 and after the subsequent fire again in 1883) it began to be obvious that the splendid building on the banks of the Vltava was too constricted for the simultaneous running of dramatic, operatic and ballet ensembles, and even then it was considered establishing an auxiliary theatre. These intentions took on more concrete form after the year 1900, when town planning studies were also elaborated for the situation of the intended new building in various parts of the centre of Prague, and after this wave too had subsided the need

for a second stage for the National Theatre was again raised by a series of magazine articles in 1917.

If earlier there had not been unity of opinion as to what the second building would serve for and what should be its relationship to the maternal theatre, now there were open clashes in the requirements of drama and opera: each of the two fields pointed to the shortcomings and obstacles met with in the original building and demanded a new and modern building for itself.

In the Free Republic

There was a new situation after the establishment of independent Czechoslovakia in 1918. Czech society naturally respected the right of the German minority in Prague to the New German Theatre, which was established in the years 1885–1887 from their own means and institutions; it considered it unjust, however, that the Estates Theatre should also serve German culture under the new state-legal circumstances, as it was provincial property. Therefore the mass requirement was raised that the Estates Theatre should be handed over to the Czech theatre and become the second stage of the National Theatre. It was as though the complaints about the lack of modernity of the National Theatre had been forgotten and the efforts of the Czech dramatists to acquire a new theatre now changed into politically motivated demands for a building in fact far less suitable and, in addition, considerably neglected.

But the German theatrical artists led by Director Leopold Kramer had a fresh agreement for the Estates Theatre from September 1918 for a further ten years which was not only not invalidated by measures taken after the takeover, but was in fact legally confirmed and supplemented in November 1918. It was President T.G.Masaryk in particular who – bearing in mind the requirements of the positive arrangement of conditions in the nationally complex conditions of the young Republic – who warned against a one-sided administrative solution and used his influence to have the matter dealt with in a strictly legal

manner and by mutual agreement. The German agents, however, did not intend to surrender their rights easily and during the negotiations, on the contrary, pointed out the limitations which the post-war conditions brought for the cultural life of the relatively small, but by no means insignificant German community in Prague. The negotiations were therefore drawn out and the radicals on the Czech side did not abandon the idea of direct action.

The Storm . . .

The breaking-point in the development of the matter was instigated by the Czech-German unrest in the autumn of 1920. The moods of conflict arose from Parliament (in which after the preceding elections there also sat representatives of German parties whose speeches greatly aroused the Czech public) and soon they reached the streets. In Teplice-Šanov and later in Cheb the Czech soldiers tore down the monuments to Josef II (from whose political measures there were now emphasised the Germanising elements), the Cheb Germans replied with a counter-attack against the Czech citizens, demolished the local Czech school and even beat up some of the schoolboys. On 16th November there then took place in Wenceslas Square a gathering participated in by wounded Cheb citizens, soldiers and children which culminated in a street storm during which various German institutions in Prague were attacked, the editorial offices of German dailies were demolished and the Estates Theatre was taken over. The Czech theatrical artists later (not quite credibly) denied that they had prepared this take-over, but they very promptly took over the occupied building from the demonstrators and that same evening they performed Smetana's opera *The Bartered Bride* there.

The representatives of almost all the political parties isolated themselves expressly from the course of the fighting in the streets – the social democrats the most vehemently of all. The taking-over of the theatre was, however, accepted on the whole

with not too striking commentaries (in both the positive and the negative sense) as a finished matter. Only a few journalists (for example the dramatist O. Fischer) condemned the unacceptable method of the take-over and only in a few places (again, for example, in the social-democratic press and later in the book entitled "The Building of the State" by Ferdinand Peroutka) was any opinion expressed on the tendential procedure of the Court before which the German dramatic company lost its subsequent case perhaps mainly because of the poorly formulated charge.

President Masaryk adopted a decisively negative standpoint, although in public he expressed his opinion only with a few indirect criticisms. On the very evening of the day in question he enjoined influential army figures to turn away the active and already demobilised legionaries (i.e. members of the so-called "legions" – military units of Czechoslovak foreign defence) after the speeches made from participation in any other actions. Up to the requested just balancing out with the German theatrical artists the President froze his recent promise of a grant of five million Kčs for the building of a new Czech theatre and in protest against the take-over action he did not visit the Estates Theatre ever again in his lifetime.

... and Conflicts

Among the Czech theatrical artists there was a rapid sobering after the victorious euphoria. They were well aware of the (especially moral) results of the President's disfavour, but mainly they were made aware every day of the problematical price of their gain in confrontation with the serious shortcomings of the theatre they took over. These were the reasons why even the Czech theatrical artists did not consider the matter of the Estates Theatre as settled by the winning of the court case, but in the continuing negotiations sought on the one hand the possibility of mutually satisfactory settlement with the German side and on the other hand looked round for a suitable replace-

ment for the Estates Theatre (it was considered, for example, purchasing the Karlín Varieté – today known as the Musical Theatre in Karlín). The negotiations did not lead to any positive result, however, in any direction.

The Year of Great Projects

This meant that even greater attention was aroused at the turn of the years 1921–22 by the statement of the then Minister of Trade Ladislav Novák, that from the means handled by his office he could make available 30 million for the construction of a new theatre and further means for this purpose could be acquired on the basis of his contacts in financial and commercial circles in this country and abroad. Novák acquired for his intention both the attention of President Masaryk, who supplied him with some sort of authorisation for further negotiations, and also the basic support of the entire Government. There were thus grounds for hope that the question of the second stage of the National Theatre and the conflict concerning the Estates Theatre would be settled in the foreseeable future, which enabled the new Government (at the head of which stood the former and future Foreign Minister and later President Edvard Beneš) to conclude with the German theatrical company according to Masaryk's intentions a quite generous agreement according to which there was (regardless of the result of the previous court decision) recognised the validity of the infringed agreement and the German theatrical company was awarded until the return of the Estates Theatre compensation at the rate of roughly two million crowns per annum.

L. Novák, however, had his own definite idea of the nature of the future theatre: he saw it as a great opera theatre at the head of which would be his friend Oskar Nedbal (Novák was the librettist of Nedbal's ballets and operas) and which would be built in the Eastern part of the Vrchlický Gardens (by the Main Station, in the angle between today's Opletalova and Bolzanova streets). The Prague theatrical artists did not want to accept all

this without discussion. Oponents of O. Nedbal made themselves heard – and this artist had plenty of these in Prague musical circles: there were fundamentally differing opinions on the siting of the new theatre building and passionate conflicts arose around the character and mission of the future theatre: the musicians called for a large operatic theatre, the dramatists pointed to the earlier settlement of the continuing crisis around the Estates Theatre in the establishment of a less demanding dramatic theatre; dramatist and producer Jaroslav Kvapil offered the building of the Municipal Theatre in Královské Vinohrady for the requirements of the National Theatre, a building originally constructed for mixed operation including operas, with the proviso that it would be made possible for the Vinohrady Theatre to build itself a new theatre with state support; the writer and dramatist Karel Čapek then repeated an idea which he had already expressed and according to which it was necessary to count on rapid changes in the demands made on the functional design of theatre buildings - and therefore it is necessary to construct theatres not as representative monuments, but as purpose-designed facilities capable of flexible adaptations according to the changing ideas of theatrical artists and cultural society.

It seemed that order would be restored in the conflicts and a way out of the polemics found in the proposal made by a group of architects: that first of all it is necessary to settle the urbanistic question of the suitable site for the theatre in a selected municipal environment, with the adaptation of this roughly proposed building for the requirements of a specially selected theatrical genre as a secondary and easily dealt-with question. For this purpose a contest of ideas was organised which was concluded in September 1922 and brought a number of very admirable projects in the spirit of the most modern ideas on the layout of theatres. In the sense of the conditions of the contest a theatre was proposed of a size suitable for 2 500 spectators and allowing the production of both dramas and operas and as far as the situation of the building was concerned the majority of projects (and specifically the works awarded prizes) concen-

trated on náměstí Republiky (Republic Square) in the immediate vicinity of the Municipal Halls with their Smetana Hall, where the scattered layout also provided for an adequate urbanistic solution.

Between the announcement and the conclusion of the contest, however, it was as if the entire situation surrounding the intended new building were changed by an evil spell: after the final settlement of the conflict with the German dramatists the President did, after all, renew his promise of support to the tune of 5 million; but on the other hand the original initiator of the generous action – Minister Novák – evidently lost interest in the matter the moment it became clear that things would not go precisely according to his (clearly affected by personal interests) ideas: there was not one single further mention of the promised 30 million or of any other help from financially strong agents, even though Novák remained in his function for several more years and also in the changed composition of the Government. The forces of the Czech building industry were increasingly in demand for the settlement of the housing situation and for the National Assembly there were declared in the course of the following year of 1923 radical economy measures.

Resignation – and Action

Hopes of the building of a new modern theatre thus receded to infinity. Again there were speculations on the use of the Varieté building, in the sale of which to the National Theatre there were interested according to some indications political figures from the Prague Town Hall and perhaps even the Mayor of Prague himself. From these circles also came fire safety arguments operating demands for the immediate closure of the Estates Theatre and also the authors of the municipal regulatory plan declared that it would be necessary to pull down the theatre in the near future for communications reasons. The artists of the National Theatre, who in the given situation clearly had given up hopes of a new modern building and were slowly coming to

terms with the conditions of the Estates Theatre, emphatically rejected the alternative of the Karlín Varieté. And so the passing time gradually grew closer to the year in which the ten-year agreement of the German dramatists on the use of the Estates Theatre was to come to an end and the emphasis also weakened on the amount of the compensation still to be paid to the Germans for the take-over of the Estates Theatre (the German dramatists had in any case in the meantime settled their situation by establishing the *Kleine Bühne* (Little Stage) on *Senovážné náměstí* by the Jindřich Tower). And so the management of the National Theatre used the available means for suitable alterations to the Estates Theatre, carried out in two series in the theatrical holidays of 1925 and 1926. The worst faults were eliminated by them and the new operation confirmed the character acquired by the theatre during stormy circumstances as the second stage of the National Theatre.

It was good that the development running in this direction led to the preservation and rehabilitation of a beautiful and historically valuable theatre building. The excited struggles for the Estates Theatre, however, also detracted the required strength from the efforts aiming, in a period of promising creative prerequisites, at the building of a new and modern theatre which is still lacking in Prague today.