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# ICOM Czechoslovakia and Jan Jelínek

International Committee of Museum the ICOM was founded in 1946. Czechoslovakia was among the first 14 signatories (other members included Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, France, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, and Britain). During the second half of 20th century the ICOM Czechoslovakia belonged to the leaders of the international museology, mainly because of the activities of Jan Jelínek, who became president of international ICOM in 1971–1977. In 1993 Czechoslovakia was formally separated into two independent countries, the Czech and Slovak Republics. Museum professionals, however, refused to accept the separation for an entire year, and continued collaborating closely with their mutual colleagues regardless. By 1994 this inescapable reality finally caused then to yield to an agreement to officially separate the joint ICOM committee.<sup>1</sup>

Since its inception ICOM's leading bodies were the Board and the Executive Council. Member base was to be established in each country through national committees, the maximum number of members in each committee being 15, and individual states were to nominate representatives from the most outstanding museums in their countries. The creation of nine working groups

according to particular specialisations of different museums laid the foundation for the establishment of international committees.

Czechoslovakia was represented at the Executive Council by leading art historian, archaeologist, and priest **Josef Cibulka** (1886–1968), director of the State Collection of Old Masters from 1938–1939, and later the National Gallery. Nominated in 1946 to represent the National Gallery, he continued to represent Czechoslovakia after leaving this institution as a professor at Charles University. Cibulka was a member of the ICOM board for two terms until 1952, when he resigned prematurely for political reasons. The early 1950s was an era of the toughest communist persecution directed towards all so-called enemies of the regime, among which were considered members of the Catholic Church. Another professional who took active part in ICOM activities was archaeologist, museum specialist, and secretary of the Czechoslovak Association of Museums (1926–1946), **Jiří Neustupný** (1905–1981), who attended the 1947 meeting in Mexico and the 1948 meeting in Paris. ICOM Czechoslovakia's first headquarters were in František Topič's library, which was a part of one of the most prestigious exhibition rooms in Prague, where many leading artists presented their works in the 1920s. Later on, ICOM Czechoslovakia's headquarters were moved to the National Museum at Wenceslas Square.

During the 1950s ICOM Czechoslovakia was stabilized. Its representatives visited the Paris plenary sessions and ICOM News reported on the exhibitions and publications of the Czechoslovak museums. However, there was not enough energy left to influence the direction in which ICOM was heading, as in the era of Josef Cibulka. The fates of individual members were as troubled as the times. In 1953 leading Czech palaeontologist and employee of the National Museum, **Ferdinand Prantl** (1907–1982) became the Chairman of ICOM Czechoslovakia. He was an opponent of the regime and he was eventually imprisoned. In 1956 **Vladimír Novotný**, former director of the National

<sup>1</sup> The information referred to in the text is based on sources from ICOM Archives (available thanks to Elisabeth Jani from the ICOM department of documentation, communication and cooperation); the archives of ICOM Czech; ICOM collection in the Archives of the Moravian Museum in Brno, hereinafter AMZM (available thanks to Jan Obrovský from AMZM); from interviews with John Hozák from the Technical Museum and Jiří Kvačka from the National Museum, as well as Z. Z. Stránský. In *Memoriam Jana Jelínka*, in: *Věstník Asociace muzeí a galerií České republiky* (Bulletin of the Association of Museums and Galleries of the Czech Republic), 2004, no. 6, p. 15–16; Vinoš Sofka: *Vzpomínka na Jana Jelínka*, in: *Věstník Asociace muzeí a galerií České republiky*, 2004, no. 6, pp. 16–18; Martin Oliva, *Profesor Jan Jelínek zemřel*. In: *Časopis Matice moravské*, LXXXIX, 2004, 1–2, pp. 291–293.

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Gallery, attended the 4th General ICOM Session in Switzerland in his place.

It was only in the 1960s that the Czech museum specialists revived their ambition to participate more actively in ICOM operations. In 1959 historian and director of the National Museum, **Vladimír Denkstein** (1906–1993) was elected chairman of ICOM Czechoslovakia and remained in this office for three terms until 1968.

In 1962, **Jan Jelínek** (1926–2004), anthropologist, museologist, director of the Moravian Museum, and Head of the Department of External Museology at the University of Jan Evangelista Purkyně in Brno, became a member of ICOM Czechoslovakia. Immediately he took an active part in the work of the International Commission for regional museums, ICOM ICR. At the General Conference in 1962 in The Hague he was elected Chairman. He remained in this office for three terms until 1971. From the inaugural speech he gave on the occasion of his second election as chairman of ICR at a conference in New York in 1965 it is worth recalling his view of the museum's three main tasks: first comes scientific work and research, second, modern documentation, and thirdly presentation. He considered scientific work in museums essential because „without the possibility of scientific research and scientific work, a museum becomes a mere loudspeaker“ and given today's computer media glorification it is not without significance to recall his plea for real object exhibitions: „museum presentations using three-dimensional materials is the only concrete form of communicating information, as opposed to abstract communication through the printed word.“<sup>2</sup>

Jan Jelínek had great ambition to embed Czechoslovak museums into international structures. In 1965 he presented a proposal that ICOM Czechoslovakia file candidacy for the organization of the General Assembly in 1968 in Czechoslovakia. He backed up this argument with the upcoming anniversaries: 150 years since the foundation of the Moravian Museum (\*1817) and the National Museum (\*1818). In 1964 he participated in the organization of international meetings of museum specialists in Opava, celebrating the 150th anniversary of the establishment of the Silesian Museum (\*1814). Unfortunately, his efforts proved unsuccessful. At the 1966 meeting in Paris it was decided that the host country

of the General Assembly would be the German Federal Republic, specifically the cities of Cologne and Munich, with Berlin being an additional excursion destination. Jan Jelínek was not discouraged, however, and taking advantage of the geographical proximity and the conference program in Germany, pushed through an extension of a post-conference excursion from Berlin to Czechoslovakia. This took place between the 12th and 14th of August 1968 in Prague, Brno and Bratislava. Four hundred museum specialists from all over the world took part. It was a huge success, the gates of Czechoslovak museums were wide open, but a mere few days later, on August 21st, 1968, there was a loud slamming of the door as Warsaw Pact occupation troops (Soviet Union, Poland, East Germany, Hungary, Bulgaria) invaded the country.

In 1968, Jelínek succeeded in one more thing, he took over the publication of ICOM News magazine, printed in Czechoslovakia until 1971.

Despite political problems in Czechoslovakia, Jan Jelínek managed to strengthen his own importance in the international ICOM. He was one of the few who were able to seek solutions to the problems which ICOM faced and formulate a vision for its further development. At the end of the 1960s ICOM was in a very serious crisis and there were even proposals in 1970 that it be disbanded. The financial situation was unbearable, the organization had huge debts, and functioning of the member base was ineffective. Part of the members formed a „revolting group“, as it was named by one of its members, ICOM director Hugues de-Varina Bohan.<sup>3</sup> Jelínek's documents show that the results of certain proceedings at that time were very abrupt. He carefully preserved the responses of Czechoslovak authorities to the events of 1971 in his archive. The June meeting in Paris in 1971 seems to have been crucial to the formation of the „revolting group“ which brought Jan Jelínek to its head. At that time he was already an executive member (since June 1970), supported by members of the secretariat and a number of representatives of national committees. On returning to Prague, Jelínek, along with his colleagues from ICOM Czechoslovakia who were also in Paris, was duly reprimanded. The planned activity should have been discussed first, so that Jelínek could obtain specific instructions, particularly in order to coordinate the process with the Soviet delegation.<sup>4</sup>

At the General ICOM Conference held at the end of August 1971 in **Grenoble, Jan Jelínek was elected president of ICOM**. In his inaugural speech he presented a plan on how to reform the organization, which consisted of three main points: **firstly, to make ICOM a worldwide organisation, stretching beyond Europe and North America; secondly to open ICOM to a larger number of members; and thirdly, to enhance education of members primarily through international committees, whose support was Jelínek's particular focus**. After his entry into the office he immediately began to work on the creation of new statutes for ICOM, which would allow for the progressive functioning of the organization.

The way members contributed financially changed. Up until then ICOM relied on small membership fees and especially on various subsidies and grants, one third of the budget consisted of UNESCO contributions. Grants were very uncertain, however. The new system was based on collecting membership fees, which rose and became stratified according to conditions in individual countries. The quota of 15 representatives for each member country was abolished, hence there were no boundaries limiting the number of institutional and individual members, whose status was more democratic – each member had from that time onward the right to vote and be elected to any function. This, as Jelínek hoped, would attract more active members, with whom it would be possible to further improve functioning of the organization. International committees thus gained an important role, as they were an ideal platform for young members to push their ideas forward. The new statutes were approved at the 10th General Conference in Copenhagen in 1974. Apart from this, new themes emerged at this particular conference. Jelínek sought to focus attention on the current situation of museums, and on the debate about the documentation of the present, which he saw as a serious problem of the contemporary museum professional. There was a discussion on the ethics of acquisition of artefacts and the relationship of museums to private collectors. This was reflected in the focus of the Copenhagen conference: „*The museum in the service of man today and tomorrow: The educational and cultural role of museums*“.

Jelínek perceived his activities in ICOM as a mission and a duty. He contemplated on the work for ICOM in great detail in 1973, when the director of ICOM, Varina Hughes de Bohan, thought about resigning from his

<sup>2</sup> Jan Jelínek, Inaugural Speech, New York, 1965, ICOM coll. AMZM.

<sup>3</sup> Hughes de Varine-Bohan, letter to Jan Jelínek 30. 9. 1971, ICOM coll. AMZM.

<sup>4</sup> Minutes from the ICOM Czech proceedings from 7th July, 1971, ICOM collection, AMZM.

position and Jelínek tried to persuade him to change his mind. He stressed the fact it was difficult to find another organization with as broad a scope as ICOM, both geographically and theoretically. Once anyone started to work for it, it had to be understood as the highest mission. Jelínek always tried to make his office an advantage for the institution, as well as for Czechoslovakia. Unfortunately, the political situation did not favour such intentions. In 1971, candidacy for holding the 10th General Conference in 1974 was discussed in Prague, but the Ministry of Culture rejected the petition. Jelínek at least strove to put through a proposal that active members of international committees have an opportunity to hold a meeting in Czechoslovakia at least once a year. It is not without interest to examine his schedule. He set apart 50 working days a year for his work as the President of ICOM and made 5 journeys abroad every year, with multiple stops in different countries. Of course, the venue of many such meetings with partners from abroad were Brno and Prague. Because of his ICOM presidency, Jan Jelínek gave up the post of director of the Moravian Museum in Brno and continued to only head Anthropos, a museum of human history which he established in Brno.

After completion of the presidential mandate Jelínek directed his energy toward strengthening the position of museology. **In 1977 he founded the International Committee for Museology ICOM and was its chairman for two terms until 1983.**

In 1968, membership of ICOM Czechoslovakia was transformed. The new Chairman, with effect from January 3rd, 1969, became nuclear physicist and director of the National Technical Museum, **Josef Kuba** (1915–1999). Josef Kuba was a very skilled museum professional in terms of management, with a broad international outlook and network of friends. He also managed to secure support of the Czechoslovak communist politicians. Josef Kuba remained chairman of ICOM Czechoslovakia for 21 years, until March 27th 1990. His objective was to enhance the technical cooperation of museums, for which purpose he convened a meeting at the National Technical Museum in Prague in 1972. There he founded the **International Committee for Museums and Collections of Science and Technology (CIMUSET)**. Josef Kuba became its chairman and remained so until 1977. He was re-elected in 1983 and held the post until 1989. From 1976–1980 he was an executive member of ICOM. Various materials were

published in the National Technical Museum print shop and the institution even provided the production of 5,000 promotional pencils in 1971.<sup>5</sup>

Czechoslovak museum professionals influenced the workings of ICOM in a fundamental way. Without their intervention ICOM would probably have remained a club of the 15 chosen ones, as Jelínek critically put it, and at least two international committees would not have existed, or would have been established elsewhere and much later.

In 1989 the communist regime in Czechoslovakia collapsed. The staff of museums and galleries immediately expressed interest in becoming members of the now free ICOM. Until 1989 only a select few, whose number never exceeded 30, could become members of ICOM Czechoslovakia. Finally they all had the same opportunity. In April 1990, Jan Jelínek helped to organize a meeting, which was attended by the **Secretary General of ICOM, Patrick Cardon**. Thanks to her strong personality, **Jana Součková**, leading Czech hethitologist, specialist in the cultural history of the Near East, carried ICOM Czechoslovakia through its tumultuous beginnings. She had substantial backing in secretary **Kateřina Tlachová**. Among the important tasks of that period was to ensure reduction of membership fees in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Thanks to this, membership soon rose from 18 to 100, and it continued to grow. Apart from that, ICOM Czechoslovakia received financial support from the Dutch government program Matra until 2000, whose aim was to support new eastern democracies. It was used for museum management courses to train managers and senior staff.

With the coming of 1992 a stormy parliamentary debate arose at the end of which a signature was placed on Czechoslovakia's „*divorce papers*“; on January 1st, 1993 the independent Czech and Slovak Republics were established. Members of ICOM Czechoslovakia refused to emulate the political situation, however, and continued in joint activities. This situation was untenable in terms of administration. The members of ICOM Czechoslovakia, still together, attended the meeting of CEICOM in Weimar and on the way back, literally on the train between Weimar and Leipzig, Czech and Slovak national committees were founded.

ICOM Czech began establishing relationships with international colleagues and served as an intermediary of their experience in the Czech Republic. It was ICOM Czech that in the 1990s promoted the benefits of using computer technology to museum professionals and also the implementation of the Internet. Apart from that ICOM Czech filed candidacy for the organization of the 2001 General Conference in Prague, the winning city, however, was Barcelona. Since 2004 ICOM Czech has also granted the **National Gloria Musaealis Award**, organized by the Association of Museums and Galleries of the Czech Republic in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic. This prestigious ICOM Czech award assesses the international contribution of realized exhibition and publishing projects, or their contribution in the development of educational programs, as well as in the area of opening museums to handicapped citizens. Among the most well known awarded projects the permanent exhibition of the Memorial Gallery in Lidice, commemorating the tragic annihilation of the village of Lidice, as revenge for the assassination of the Reich Protector Reinhard Heidrich in 1942, is worth mentioning. Since 1962 ICOM Czech has been establishing a picture gallery from the contributions of renowned international artists such as Gerhard Richter. In 2013, the exhibition was installed in an exemplary manner and newly introduced to the general public.

Gradually, Czech museum professionals began actively integrating into international committees and many found themselves in their presidency during the past 25 years. ICOM Czech has also held a number of conferences, which has introduced contemporary Czech museums to their international colleagues. Our wish is to continue to contribute to ICOM proceedings in a wider scope. ■

<sup>5</sup> Rapports sur les activités du Comité Tchécoslovaque de l'ICOM, oddělení dokumentace, komunikace a spolupráce ICOM.