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**"MATERIALIZING THE IDEA OF THE MONUMENT TO THE VICTIMS OF THE BATTLE OF AUSTERLITZ"**

When shortly after four o'clock in the afternoon on Monday the 2nd of December 1805, the sun was setting over the country east of the Moravian major city of Brno, which had been turned into a battleground early in the morning that day, the victor of the battle fought between French, Austrians and Russians near Slavkov /Austerlitz Napoleon the first had already been thinking about his proclamation that he would end in the famous words: "Soldiers! I am satisfied with you!...You needn't say anything but I took part in the Battle of Austerlitz, and their answer will be: This is a hero!".

**A cult of victory was born here.**

Of course the battlefield was not just the scene of the victors' heroism and the terrain where the immortal fame of the defeated heroes had just originated; some 15 thousand of them had died during the short winter day, most of them Russians. The city of Brno where the peace negotiations were initially held, was stricken with a fast spreading epidemic of the typhoid-fever which afflicted the troops and the civilians alike.

As the time passed and the deepest wounds at least were partially healed, the situation here was still somewhat different, compared to other battlefields, where the locals have celebrated the bravery of their campaigners up to the present, no matter whether they were victorious or ended-up defeated. There is some difference between Austerlitz and, say „Leipzig's Battle of the Nations“ or the heroic Russian Borodino. Moravians, the local people whose fields had been trampled-down and villages plundered and burnt, did not belong to any of the warring parties. Although their fathers, sons and brothers had also died at Austerlitz, they had not fought to distinguish themselves as the victorious defenders of their homeland. Undoubtedly they held in esteem the Monarch of the empire whose part their country had been, still the awakening emancipation of their awareness of their country's history as well as the half-forgotten legacy of their language, culture and national pride led them in a different direction, to finally reach the very threshold of the national independence a hundred years later.

In spite of that the Moravians had been, as mentioned before, directly involved in the conflict of war, not merely its onlookers. This is also reflected in one of the inscriptions on the shields held by the four shieldbearers at the Cairn of Peace. Now I would like to tell you the short story of the Monument. Its brief outline may give us an indirect and modest answer to the question of purpose and message of the war memorials within the integrating Europe. The main purpose of the plentiful monuments and memorials built from antiquity until now has been to represent might and glory, and many of them have been meant to make the orientation in history “easier“ /in quotation marks/; often they reflect the seeking and finding of an identity at the state or national level. In the story of the initiation and purpose of the Cairn of Peace, however, it was

not the governments, politicians, soldiers or the Church or perhaps an institutionalized ideology of any kind who played the leading. The initiative was taken by the common people. The people who felt respect for human sacrifice as part of their own human identity, whichever warring party the dead had fought for.

Several decades after the Battle of Austerlitz, the Brno priest and secondary-school teacher, Father Alois Slovák (1859 – 1930) took down the following words in his diary: 'I know a graveyard four hours' walk long and two hours' walk wide. A vast grave-yard where thousands of dead lie at rest. Nobody bedecks their graves with flowers or lights them-up, nobody prays-on-them... They are forlorn graves of the dead on the Pratzen battlefield!' Shortly afterwards this man started to work for the creation of a dignified place of rest with no more „forlorn graves“ of the battle victims - at first with his students and those who listened to his Sunday sermons, later with his friends and acquaintances mostly from the villages on the former battleground.

Who were those „friends and acquaintances“? Simply, they were people like you and I. Priests, teachers, clerks, peasants, craftsmen. Let us look at the faces of some of them: František Proskowetz, director of a sugar refinery, Clemens Janetschek, priest, Antonín Haas, forester, Julius Jandík, shoemaker, Emerich Valníček, shopkeeper, Ignác Koněl, teacher, Tomáš Beneš, peasant, Ludvík Bělohoubek, publican – they were about thirty to forty at the beginning (and no women – it is the 1890's).

For the first time they, the people of “all social standings“ as they wrote, met at the pub called na “Bednárně” (At the Cooper's) in the village of Sokolnice in November 1899. It was there and later at the local school where they would meet the most often, and start to work for the fulfilment of their big dream: building a monument to honour the victims of the Battle of Austerlitz, and at the same time a dignified place of rest for them. What was the intended symbolism of the monument clearly follows from one of the first declarations by the „Committee for the Establishment of a Dignified Ossuary on the Abandoned Battlefield of Austerlitz“: „/.../ we do not want to build a monument celebrating a victory, or perhaps a monument to commemorate our (that is Austrian meant) defeat - the single goal we pursue is that humanity and respect for the dead eventually celebrate their victory on the abandoned Battlefield of Austerlitz.“

It was not that difficult to win over a few friends and students for the idea, and even win a broader circle of supporters. A more difficult task was to raise the funds needed to realise the idea. The Sokolnice enthusiasts hoped to obtain a major part of the necessary amount – roughly estimated to be 100,000 crowns – from the governments of France, Austria and Russia, the states whose armies had fought the legendary battle near Austerlitz at the end of 1805. And they hoped to receive the funding in time for the monument to be completed by the 100th anniversary of the battle in 1905. This necessitated an enormous effort, as documented by the archival materials, though unfortunately scarce. And in the end things turned-out differently and it took much longer time to achieve the original goal than they had envisaged and hoped for.

In contrast to the later development the beginning was a real success: in 1901 the Sokolnice citizens turned to the governments of the countries involved with a request for contributions for the construction and no later than in four years' time (sic!) the Committee received 13 150

roubles in their account, which was almost half the sum needed, from the Russian Ministry of War. Bearing in mind that this happened without much reminding and bureaucratic delays, it was a really gratifying result - particularly if we take into account that the Austrian government and Archduke Friedrich who adopted the role of the protector of the memorial, made a contribution of 2000 crowns another few years later, and later still he contributed a rounded sum of 500 crowns, which amounted to approximately one twentieth of the Russian share.

And what about the French? For several years the inheritors of the Austerlitz victors repeatedly assured the Sokolnice committee about their support. In August 1906, five years after the French embassy in Prague had been approached for contribution for the first time, the deputation of the Committee (quote): „was assured that the Commandant Girodou had intervened in Paris on that matter for three times already, and he would request an early and definitive decision from his government...” Indeed, the Committee eventually received a contribution of about one tenth of the total cost of the construction from the French Government and the Council of the City of Paris - at the time when the construction work had long been in progress.

The Sokolnice quixotic enthusiasts did not of course count on the funds from the governments, politicians or institutions only. They gave their own savings in the ‘memorial cashbox’, however their greatest success was the fund-raising among the people from the surrounding villages and towns, at the charity concerts and theatre performances and on similar occasions: in small amounts they finally collected an amazing 30 000 crowns – nearly one third of the total sum needed! The picture you are looking at represents the initial idea of the Monument’s structure as originally seen by its initiators. Its sale yielded a relatively large sum.

It was none the easier to reach a consensus on the design and the designer of the monument. Should they advertise a public competition for the design? Or perhaps just approach some of the well-known architects?

There were numerous questions difficult to answer and lack of clarity on a number of points, and only one unquestionable certainty: the only appropriate place for the monument was at the top of Pratzen Hill. It was there where the Battle of Austerlitz was decided, it was there and in the surrounding area where the fighting was the fiercest [fiéřist] and took its heaviest toll.

In the process of seeking the best way to select the author of the design the opinion finally prevailed that some of the renowned authors should be approached. In January 1905 two of the best-reputed architects received „a petition kindly requesting the granting of the wish“ from the Sokolnice Committee: The leading figure of the contemporary Austrian architecture, Professor of the Vienna College of Technology Otto Wagner (1841 –1918) and the Prague architect Josef Fanta (1856 –1954), an author whose principal and best-known work – the Railway Station of Franz Joseph the first in Prague (later known as Wilson’s, today the Main Railway Station) – was then, in 1905, nearly finished. Today, it is known to everyone arriving in Prague by train.

It is hard to tell why only the two architects were approached, the records have offered no indication of the reason, the only thing certain is the reputation both of them enjoyed as „men of undisputed eminence and great spirit“.

In early 1905 Slovák hoped, to receive the designs „perhaps in the month of June“ of the same year (sic!). Indeed it appeared in the beginning that things would go well, including the realisation of the plans. Both the architects promptly sent their answers. Wagner refused to participate in the project, saying that (quote) „his idea to proceed from the Empire style would not find favour with the other members of the jury“ (and his judgement was absolutely correct). However, he promised to be on the jury and recommended that several leading representatives of Viennese Art Nouveau, among others Gustav Klimt, should also be called in as jury members.

Josef Fanta, however, fell silent after his initial prompt answer and, after receiving several reminders, finally submitted his designs as late as the spring 1906. They were six altogether, all of them in Art Nouveau style. The expert jury selected the one epitomizing the effort (essential idea) of the Committee by its very name: „Cairn of Peace“.

In the long months to follow, however - obviously not due to lack of activity on the part of the Committee whose chairman Father Slovák kept tirelessly sending out tens of letters, petitions, requests and reminders to all quarters – things hardly moved forward. The 100th anniversary of the battle had passed (without any activities worthy of mention), the same as the year 1906 and the following years without any noticeable progress reached. Fanta himself visited Sokolnice and the site chosen for the Monument more than four years later after his design was chosen, in the summer of 1909. Maybe it was also Slovák’s almost desperate entreaties that finally persuaded him to arrive, such as the one from May 1909, ending in the words: ‘Our celebrated Architect and Master, please do not abandon us, without you we will be completely lost!’ or another Slovák’s appeal or rather an emphatic reminder sent to him: „Our cause brooks no further delay. We gave a pledge to the Russian government /.../ to definitely start on the construction of the Monument before the end of this year.“ This commitment was impossible to meet.

At the end of 1909 Fanta at least provided the construction plans to the Committee. This allowed the tired „Sokolnice folks“ to draw a breath and recover their strength and trust in final success. In January 1910 a building company was selected, in the spring the construction-site was marked-out – and in June 1910 the construction work was eventually started. After more than ten years the dream eventually began to materialize ...

There started to rise a construction of a cairn with its base designed as a rough square, a twenty-six-metre-high spheric pyramid crowned with a sacral sculpture embodying its idea and completing its architecture. The ramps in the base corners underline the fact that the structure rises from the ground covering the remains of the dead. Sculptures of eagles were designed to be placed in the monument’s corners, but those were later replaced with figures of hero soldiers - shield-bearers who guard the monument – wholly in harmony with the monument’s idea of a symbol of tolerance. Three of the shield-bearers personify the warring parties: France, Austria and Russia. The fourth of them wields a shield with an inscription MORAVIA, the land devastated by the fighting armies.

The spirit of the sacred place and the crucial theme of the monument are expressed, apart from the numerous biblical quotations and the central attribute of personified Christian love, the symbol of Christ’ sacrifice – the pelican feeding its young with its blood – by the words of the Old Testament Prophet Isaiah ‘Interfecti mei resurgent - My Dead shall rise again’ engraved over the Chapel’s entrance.

At both sides of the chapel entry are elliptical granite [grenit] slabs mounted, with the same text carved in Czech, French and German, devoted to the memory of the Austrian, Russian and French dead; the Russian inscription commemorates the sacrifice of Russian soldiers only, as the Russian government stipulated when providing its contribution for the monument's construction...

The central spiritual space of the Memorial is the chapel located along the axis of the Cairn. Underneath the Chapel was built a crypt – an ossuary, as a central commemorative space designed for the depositing of the remains of the dead, thus fulfilling the original intent of the project. Here the remains of dead found in the surroundings still continue to be deposited, usually within the Annual Commemoration Act, though not quite as Father Slovák and his friends had originally intended - they planned to have exhumed remains from all over the battlefield collected here. (The idea was wholly unrealistic – not even the twenty mass graves uncovered until today have yet been fully examined.)

The Monument was finished in 1912. Only the sculpture of a mourning mother and a bride to frame the Chapel entry was missing to make the structure complete and was only installed several months later. The official opening of the Monument was planned for early August 1914. In June of the same year the Sokolnice Committee had drawn up a programme for the festive opening, drafted a list of official guests and written invitations. The opening programme included the „consecration of the Chapel and the whole Monument following Roman-Catholic and Russian ceremonies“, which matter to be honest had been subject to long discussions and even disputes between the Committee and the Brno bishopric during the preceding years.

On 28 July 1914 the war broke out. Its enormous death toll and the amount of terror and suffering it brought, were incomparable to those caused by the Napoleonic wars. The effort of the Sokolnice Committee seemed to have come to nothing, especially at the point when the Austrian military authorities were intent on using even the metal elements of the Monument bearing the name 'Cairn of Peace' for the arms production (sic!). Although that intention was thwarted, there was no real hope for fulfilling the purpose and delivering the message of the Monument before the war's end. Only then the members of Committee, now older and reduced in number, recovered a glimmer of hope for the final completion of their work. Almost 25 years after the men of "all social standings" held their meetings at the Sokolnice pub to set up the committee for its foundation, the Monument was eventually opened to the public in 1923. At the same time was also the memento of the Cairn of Peace added to the original biblical texts, expressed by the words of the first president of the independent Czechoslovak state T. G. Masaryk: "Plough, not sword!".

The religious symbolism of the Monument, though kept rigorously at a commemorative level, was anyway not in harmony with the state ideology of the independent Czechoslovak Republic or with the orientation of its authorities – the Chapel of the Cairn of Peace was not consecrated at that or any later time. Perhaps even this circumstance, at first perceived by many as ruining many years of their efforts, in the end brought-out the initial idea of tolerance which had originally inspired the plan to build the monument. Today the divine services are celebrated in the Chapel irrespective of the differing ceremonies of various denominations... The war memorials often highlight sensitive points within the international relations. Considering the general European and in particular Central European experience of the 20th century, it is

obviously just the kind of memorials like the one I talked about, it is the „signs of the memory“ that do not serve a single particularist „cult“, that do have a place within the society based on pluralism of views, which the integrated Europe wants to be and should be.

In conclusion, lyrics of a song from the region around Brno whose folklore was given a new inspiration by the events of the Battle of Austerlitz, says: „there was a war, there was a shambles, and rivers of blood knee-deep ran through Moravia“. The same as this folk song, the war memorials should honour not only the glory won by some or heroism shown by others. The soil of all the battlegrounds in the world is actually soaked with blood, in contrast to the other graveyards. And it does not matter whether it is the blood of the victors or the defeated.

## Sources

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