Center Stage

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Part Four

The Czech National Theater in Prague
CHAPTER SIX

Launching the National Theater Project

The Founders

The history of the National Theater in Prague is itself dramatic enough to serve as the plot of an opera. The first act would open with a group of dignitaries inspired by the idea of founding a national theater. But to do so they must overcome the weaknesses of the ascendant nation’s cultural life, which they would sing of in the first ensemble scene: the neglect of the language, the meager repertoire, and the limitations of the public. Then a determined young lawyer, of such impressive stature that he would have to be a powerful bass baritone (František Ladislav Rieger), enters the stage and calls together a founding committee. The first hurdle is taken when the hostile imperial government consents to the project, aware that it cannot suppress all civil initiatives and assuming that culture is apolitical. The second act would show the theater project gaining momentum and, in spite of the inimical bureaucracy, becoming the hub of a national movement. A second mass scene would portray the ceremonial laying of the foundation stone as a moment of hope and pride. In the third act of this fictional opera, disputes between the various soloists and the opposing political factions (the so-called Old Czechs and Young Czechs) almost cause the project’s collapse. The tragic nadir—but emotional climax for the audience—would be the disaster at the end of this act. Shortly before reaching completion, the theater—the labor of an entire generation—goes up in flames. Yet in the fourth act, which would musically link up with the first, the national theater would rise like a phoenix from the ashes. The joyous finale would show the theater’s inauguration: curtain up on a newborn theater, curtain down on our fictional libretto.

Sometimes history writes the best libretti. After a lengthy founding phase between 1844 and 1883, Czech society actually did manage to construct a prestigious theater, build a rich repertoire and even create a new genre of music theater—Czech opera—within only two generations. The creation of the national
Center Stage

Theater discussed in this chapter is of interest not only for Czech history. It shows the dynamics that can be at work in a modern mass society and national movements. It demonstrates the social and aesthetic limitations of a nationalism which promised the (utopian) equality and participation of all the members of the nation as well as the cultural productivity of which German philosopher and founder of modern nationalism Johann Gottfried Herder had dreamed. Lastly, the National Theater was a site of great artistic creativity. When it was still only a vision, it inspired Smetana to write operas portraying the new departures in Czech society, it played a part in launching Dvořák’s career, it hosted Fibich’s original treatment of Wagner’s legacy, and ultimately it became an important center of modernism in European music theater.

This rich chapter in Czech cultural history was ushered in by a group of 140 distinguished gentlemen, who joined forces in 1844 in order to found an independent Czech theater.1 The group consisted mainly of Czech burghers and some prominent aristocrats who had been involved in the Estates Theater, where Czech dramas were occasionally performed, as well as the first Czech operas. But this did not satisfy the demands of the national activists who wanted to see the Czechs acknowledged as a legitimate and refined cultural nation in their own right. In 1845, the group petitioned the government for the construction of a Czech national theater on the following grounds: “Bitter shame fills us at the thought that we Czechs, who look back on our ancestors with pride and how they competed with their neighbors in all the noble arts, have fallen behind in this branch of art and in the circle of civilized nations are the only ones to still not have a theater. We no longer want to stand like barbarians alongside the last of the nations in the noble art of Thalia.”2 Hence the primary task of the national theater was to help promote the Czech language and foster native drama and opera.

Initially, however, the national theater was not a purely Czech project. For some years, notices promoting it were written in German as well as Czech and referred to a Bohemian (böhmisch) national theater. Significantly, in the Czech language no distinction is made between Czech and Bohemian.3 The national movement aimed to incorporate all those whose mother tongue was Czech. Meanwhile, the Estates Theater also gained a last chance to be accepted as a Czech theater in the prerevolution period. Following a major structural reform in 1846, it was divided into two sections—Czech and German. Each section was assigned its own director. Thus Czech theater activists were placed in a similar position to the Polish nobility at the Skarbek Theater, where a native-language and a German ensemble also shared and alternately used the stage. In 1849, the two directors of the Estates Theater issued a new appeal to the nationally minded nobility to invest in hereditary boxes and make donations toward a Czech theater.4 The Estates Theater had been financed in this way by a number of aristo-
cratic families since 1798. But the Czech-oriented aristocracy lacked the means to support such an undertaking and so missed this chance to be in the vanguard of the national movement.

The failure of the revolution brought an end to this phase of German-Czech cooperation. In 1851, Karel Havlíček, a leading democratic Czech activist, wrote in the magazine Slovan under the heading “Our national theater”: “actually the German theater in Prague is unnatural because the cluster of real Germans who live in Prague would never be able to sustain it were it not for the help of our pseudo-Germans. These pseudo-Germans will now, however, become annually less until the generation which was led out of Egypt dies out, and after the establishment of a completely Czech theater in Prague we will no doubt draw away a considerable number of patrons from the German theater.”

Despite having recently quashed the revolution, in 1850 the government authorized the founding of a Committee for the Establishment of a Czech National Theater in Prague (Sbor pro zřízení českého Národního divadla v Praze) in the belief that it would provide a safe outlet for general civil dissatisfaction. Yet the first public appeal for donations toward a national theater in 1851 betrayed its political volatility, since it clearly symbolized nothing less than a monument to the constitutional rights and equality of the Czechs. The public’s response was correspondingly enthusiastic and by 1852 enough funds had been raised to purchase a plot of land. Subsequently, the government tried to obstruct the project’s progress by prohibiting public fundraising appeals. The committee reacted by dispatching 90,000 circulars and advertising notices, not only to destinations within Bohemia but also to Moravia, Galicia, Hungary, and Vienna.

From the mid-1850s, however, the flow of donations began to falter. By this time, the Czech-oriented members of the nobility had given generously, with Prince Jan Lobkowitz donating the highest sum of 6,000 guilders. And lower middle-class supporters, especially, had exhausted their resources, having donated valuables such as clocks and jewelry as well as money. Furthermore, the scope of the Czech theater association’s appeal was severely geographically limited. In the 1850s, 80 percent of the donations came from Prague and its immediate surroundings.

The October Diploma in 1860 and the subsequent liberalization of Austria allowed the committee to resume public fundraising and the project gained new momentum. In 1862, the so-called Provisional Theater was built, securing the regular performance of Czech drama until the national theater was completed. This era saw the inception of many other cultural institutions including the Hlahol choral society and Umělecká beseda. All were motivated by the desire to build an independent Czech cultural scene and break the hegemony of German culture, especially in Prague.
The Provisional Theater

The Prozatímní divadlo, which literally translates as “provisional theater,” was indeed a temporary arrangement. With an only 900-seat capacity and a stage nine-and-a-half meters wide, it was modestly sized, and did not have a grand foyer. The orchestra consisted of the members of a dance band, supplemented at first by musicians from the Estates Theater. A third of the singers were also under contract to the Estates Theater and they could only appear on their free evenings. Due to the shortage of Czech-language dramas, comedies, and operas, the number of performances was limited to three per week, and the theater soon accrued a large deficit. Impending bankruptcy could only be averted by the generous donations from some wealthy Prague burghers. But Bohemia’s Czech-aligned aristocrats determined to do their bit too. In 1861, Count Jan Harrach set up a handsomely endowed competition for comic operas and another for historical operas. The latter was won by Bedřich Smetana with his first opera The Brandenburgers in Bohemia (Braniboři v Čechách). Meanwhile, spoken drama at the theater also improved and in 1864 a Shakespeare festival was held. Performances were now given daily and the ensemble extended so that it was no longer dependent on the Estates Theater.

At this point, a crucial organizational reform took place. The personally liable impresario who had hitherto run the theater was replaced by a collective known as the National Theater Association (Družstvo národního divadla), consisting originally of 24 shareholder-members. On investing capital of between 500 and 1000 guilders each, they assumed liability for the theater’s losses and became eligible to elect the director. Smetana eagerly accepted the position of Director of Opera, which at last secured him a steady income. Shortly after his appointment he performed his own The Bartered Bride to such acclaim that the Austrian Empress came to see it in October 1866. Other, now all but forgotten new operas and gradually a Czech repertoire accumulated.

Surprisingly, it was the most gifted of all these composers, Bedřich Smetana, who encountered opposition to his major dramatic work, Dalibor. Some critics and members of the public objected to its allegedly Wagnerian style, with its strong orchestration, predominant use of brass, and storyline reminiscent of Lohengrin. Since the very raison d’être of the Provisional Theater was to gain emancipation from German culture, this was a serious accusation indeed. It is true, Smetana was aesthetically oriented toward the New German School (Neudeutsche Schule) around Franz Liszt, with whom he maintained close contact throughout his life. But in essence, Bohemian debates on the merits and demerits of the Wagnerian style were attempts to resolve whether to write text-oriented, dramatic operas in the German style or basically adhere to the traditional Italian
model and incorporate elements of Czech folk music. Some years later, after Smetana had cemented his popularity, this dispute abated.

Thanks to the fruits of the productive local music scene, over a fifth of the Provisional Theater’s operas were soon of native provenance, roughly equivalent to the amount of Polish operas performed at the Lemberg Theater under Dobrzański. Imported works were usually translated into Czech. French operas were most often performed, making up a third of the repertoire. With its good supply of French and Italian pieces and some popular Czech shows, the opera department of the Provisional Theater soon rivaled that of the Estates Theater.

In broad terms, the Provisional Theater provided the right conditions for developing and experimenting with Czech opera. For the twenty years of its existence, the small stage was a positive advantage, automatically limiting the extravagance of productions and hence public expectations as well as the potential for financial losses. The native repertoire was able to grow without the pressure of having to fill a 1,800-seat theater like the Skarbek Theater in Lemberg.

This success sustained Czech plans to construct a national theater. A new appeal for donations in 1865 yielded 127,000 guilders within a year. An additional 70,000 guilders came from districts outside Prague and its immediate vicinity, indicating that the national theater initiative was now becoming a mass movement. Despite an interruption in the flow of donations when Prussia attacked Austria in 1866, by 1867, 150,000 guilders had been raised. With the cost of construction estimated at 427,000 guilders, the new National Theater seemed within reach and the Committee prepared to officially begin construction work.

Mass Mobilization

The foundation stone ceremony over the weekend of May 16–17, 1868, was the largest mass event in Bohemian history in the long nineteenth century. According to the estimate by the Polish (and therefore perhaps impartial) newspaper Gazeta Narodowa, roughly 100,000 people lined the processional route and 200,000 more watched from specially constructed stands, balconies, and rooftops. This number equaled the entire population of Prague and its suburbs. Crowds jostled at the stations as passengers poured out of well over 100 specially chartered trains with up to 70 carriages. All the hotels in town were fully booked and many visitors were spontaneously invited to stay in private accommodation.

Bohemia was captivated by the prospect of a national theater weeks before construction began. The organizing committee responsible for the celebrations, in which left-wing liberals—later to become the Young Czechs—played a decisive role, resolved to lay not just one but nearly twenty symbolic foundation stones. Each was sourced from a site bearing significance for Czech myth or history and with its own local group of national activists. The largest stone weighed
As the stone was being prepared for transport, 10,000 peasants took the opportunity to spontaneously demonstrate against new taxes introduced since Austria’s defeat by Prussia. 100 horsemen then escorted the heavy load to Prague where 80,000 people had gathered to witness its arrival on May 12. Further stones arrived from the provinces almost daily, sustaining the mood of excitement in the Bohemian capital.

The celebrations reached a climax—like a nineteenth-century Czech Woodstock—on May 16, 1868. On this day, a grand parade of 60 groups representing different sections of Czech society was held. Craftsmen and laborers formed the largest groups, which were organized according to profession. The executive committee of the diet—Bohemia’s highest political body—decided not to lead the procession but to walk among the others. The rural districts also sent delegations so that all regional administrative bodies were represented too. 2,600 choir singers and 1,500 gymnasts made up the second and third largest groups. Each professional group had standard bearers wearing historical or traditional costumes. And all were escorted by a number of musical bands, making the parade an acoustically as well as visually impressive event.

The choreography of the parade was modeled on medieval coronation processions. But the fact that Prague had no king to lead the people in 1868 was a point of contention. The main speaker at the foundation stone ceremony, Karel Sladkovský, alluded to it several times and called for the Austrian emperor to accept the crown of King Wenceslas. One year after Franz Joseph had agreed to be crowned King of Hungary following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, thus recognizing Hungary as an equal nation-state, the Czech elites demanded an equivalent symbolic act to elevate the status of their nation. Contemporary operas reflected the political situation, in particular Bedřich Smetana’s dramatic opera *Dalibor*, which was performed as part of the celebrations marking the laying of the National Theater’s foundation stones.

The government in Vienna, however, stubbornly ignored Czech demands for equality on the political and operatic stage. The emperor and high-ranking representatives of the House of Habsburg were glaringly absent from the founding celebrations and so too was Prague’s Cardinal. In his place, František Palacký, one of the leading agents of Czech cultural nationalism, “blessed” the theater in a quasi-religious ceremony. Journalists served to reinforce the popular perception of the National Theater as a hallowed site by referring to it as a “cathedral” and a “temple.”

A pan-Slavic congress was held in Prague to coincide with the second day of the founding celebrations. Among the congress guests were leading intellectuals and politicians from all Slavic countries. Many were overwhelmed by the celebrations and the beauty of Prague, and speaker after speaker at the ceremonial
banquet assured the Czechs that they could rely on the solidarity of the Slavs and even of the “Slavonic nation.”22 While the speeches were not of any real political consequence, the sheer amount of congratulations and admiration served to boost the confidence of the Czech theater movement. Congratulatory telegrams, mostly from similarly emergent Slavic nations, filled the pages of Prague’s newspapers for days. The mood of the pan-Slavic congress, and of the entire founding celebration, was deeply emotional. Speeches by the foreign guests were punctuated with tumultuous applause and interjections of “Bravo!” “Viva!” or “Splendid!” whenever reference was made to Slavic unity or the Czechs’ brilliant prospects.23 Unlike some Western Slavic languages, Serbian and Russian were not readily understood by the Czechs, but common ground was found nonetheless, especially late in the evening when plenty of drinks had been imbibed.

Rather than resting on their laurels—or idly nursing hangovers—after the grand celebrations, the theater activists harnessed the momentum thus gained and launched a coin collection (Kreuzersammlung) in 1869 which yielded 20,000 guilders. Vojtěch Hynais invested this in a magnificent stage curtain bearing the image of a widow with her children making a donation toward the Národní divadlo, which still hangs in the National Theater today. Large and numerous donations now also came from the more distant regions of Bohemia and Moravia.

For the Czech national movement, the celebrations of 1868 were just the first in a series of major events. The commemoration of Jan Hus, Palacký’s seventieth birthday and the regional Tábory camps, named after those of the Hussites, were all occasions mobilizing hundreds of thousands of people. Yet the actual goal of equality with the Germans and Hungarians within the monarchy remained elusive. In October 1868, the government in Vienna clamped down, declaring a state of emergency in Bohemia and imposing severe fines and even prison sentences on prominent agents of the national movement. The mood among the national activists turned from festivity to embitterment.24

The younger generation in the national movement, among them Karel Sladkovský and the brothers Julius and Eduard Gregr, publishers of the newspaper Národní listy, took a more radical stance than their older associates including Palacký. A distinction began to be made between the Young Czechs and the Old Czechs around František Ladislav Rieger. But perhaps more than by age, they were divided by different upbringings. The Old Czechs grew up in the Biedermeier era, many beginning their careers in the service of the nobility, and identified with the Habsburg state, its aristocratic character and a cautious approach to reforms. The Young Czechs, by contrast, were mostly self-made men; lawyers, journalists, and successful businessmen. While the Old Czechs viewed the revolution of 1848 with skepticism, some Young Czechs had fought at its front line. The political constellation was essentially similar to that in Galicia, with conservative and moderate liberals confronting left-wing liberals and democrats. In
1873, a conflict broke out over how to respond to the government’s repressive measures which culminated in an embittered election campaign a year later.

The political conflicts did not bypass the Provisional Theater. Fighting broke out in the auditorium at the premiere of Sardou’s *Rabagas*. This satire on the social parvenus and flag-waving nationalists of Paris in the early years of the decade so enraged the Young Czechs among the audience, who took it as a personal affront, that they shouted down the performance and caused an affray.25 A short time later, the Young Czechs set up a separate theater association with the aim of taking over the Provisional Theater. In 1876, the executive committee of the diet handed the theater over to the Young Czechs’ association despite its limited capital stock. Within a year it was bankrupt—a scenario that was only too familiar to Lemberg.26

These constant disputes on the political and theatrical stage had drastic repercussions on the theater’s fundraising campaign. In 1873, a stock market crash caused the value of the donation fund to sink to 67,000 guilders while the cost of construction was now estimated at 1.6 million guilders. In 1875, only 7,600 guilders were raised and in 1876, when the Young Czech theater association made a loss of 130,000 guilders, a mere 730 guilders. The national theater project faltered, but at crisis point, disaster was averted. Unlike in Lemberg in the period 1872–1875, where the aristocrats and the intelligentsia could not overcome their mutual antagonism, the Old Czechs stepped in to shore up the Young Czech theater association with extra funds. In April 1877, the Old Czech-dominated United Association (*Spojené družstvo*) was set up to cover losses, provide new capital and run the Provisional Theater.27 Thus each of the political camps in Bohemia demonstrated their willingness to compromise and to cooperate for the benefit of the nation. They could not allow the Czech theater to go bankrupt or even temporarily close as long as Prague still had a German theater. Local composers, in part concerned for their royalties, also called for compromise. In October 1876, the Organization of Czech Dramatic Writers and Composers convinced the Young Czech theater association to negotiate with the Old Czechs and not let the Provisional Theater fall to a private impresario.28

With fresh optimism, the theater activists tried out new ways of rallying the people. In 1877, the Committee for the Establishment of a National Theater organized a lottery on the island of Žofin in aid of construction. Brass bands and choirs provided entertainment while visitors were invited to buy affordably-priced lottery tickets. Within a few months, 177,000 guilders had been raised. Meanwhile, the Theater Association advertised for new members. Nearly 2,000 wealthy burghers bought “shares” in the theater, filling its coffers with a further 100,000 guilders. Thus all levels of society were involved in different ways. In early 1881, after 30 years of fundraising, the goal of a national theater was on the verge of being realized.
Destroyed and Rebuilt

The inauguration of the *Národní divadlo* in the same year was ill-starred from the outset. To stress its importance as a state occasion, František Ladislav Rieger, the driving force in the National Theater Association, invited high-ranking representatives of the monarchy to attend. With much effort, he managed to gain confirmation from Crown Prince Rudolf and his wife Stefanie of their attendance on May 25. But they canceled at the last minute due to Stefanie allegedly falling ill. The fact that they had attended the German-language Estates Theater just one evening previously exacerbated the Czechs’ disappointment. Rieger’s daughter, librettist Marie Červinkova-Riegrová, noted in her diary: “Prague is indignant. Stefanie is sick and they have announced that she will not be coming. In Prague all the preparations for her welcome were complete, they cost a lot of money, and many people who came from the country were of course disappointed.” Any visitors to Prague hoping for a repeat of 1868’s festivities would also have been frustrated. Rieger had invited only 300 high-ranking figures in a deliberate bid to ensure a statelier event than thirteen years previously. In this way, he hoped to avoid confrontation with the government and deprive the Young Czechs of a rallying opportunity. The public resented this elitist arrangement. Many had made donations to the National Theater and wanted to take part in its inauguration.
Rieger was able to pacify these critics by promising a second opening ceremony on St. Wenceslas Day in September 1881, by which time the roof paneling and other final details were due to be complete.

But it never came to this. On August 12, 1881, welders working on the roof of the National Theater accidentally started a fire which soon set the whole building ablaze. Within a few hours the National Theater was gutted. Národní listy, the highest circulation Czech newspaper, printed a thick black border on the next day’s issue surrounding the lines: “With tears in our eyes, with trembling hearts, we bring our countrymen this unexpected, terrible news! Our great, national theater, this toil and endeavor of two whole generations, this magnificent monument to our national rebirth—Oh, curse, if you have a Czech heart!—is no more, it is a ruin.” The emotional response was no mere journalistic device. In the streets, many people walked, tearful and distraught, to gaze on the site of the disaster. Rieger, who had initiated the project in 1845 and nurtured it for 36 years, sat at home and wept. Rumors began to circulate that envious Germans had started the fire. But the actual cause—negligence—was ascertained and announced before any disturbances erupted.

The initial shock gave way to a mood of defiance. The very next morning, citizens began donating toward the rebuilding of the theater. Spontaneous collections were held in restaurants and inns and even on the streets. Within five days, 240,000 guilders had been collected. After two weeks the sum had risen to half a million and by the end of 1881 it totaled three quarters of a million. The show of international solidarity was remarkable. The Lemberg town council made a spontaneous donation of 1,000 guilders; the municipal authorities in Krakow pledged 500 guilders and Poznań gave 1,400 marks, equivalent to 1,000 guilders. In Lemberg a charity bazaar was also held in aid of the National Theater. 11 percent of donations came from districts outside the Bohemian Lands. Only Slovakia (then known as Upper Hungary) proved less openhanded.

After the fire, Czech relations with Poland intensified. Divadelní listy wrote in 1881 in response to the sympathy and donations from all three Partition regions: “The numerous voices from Galicia, the province of Posen, the kingdom, Polesia and Lithuania, indeed, from all sides where the sweet Polish language resounds, are precious evidence of the fact that the idea of our national fraternity is already in our blood and has permeated nearly all levels of Polish society.” Actually, this could not have been true of most Galician peasants, who could not read and had never set foot in a theater, but it was certainly true of the Polish intelligentsia. They regarded the teatr narodowy w Pradze as their own; as swój. In return, the Provisional Theater showed a number of Polish works, including Moniuszko’s Halka in 1868.

All the many generous donations from abroad were outdone, however, by the contribution of the Habsburgs. Political discord notwithstanding, they appre-
associated the great symbolic value of a cultural institution like the National Theater. Franz Josef and the empress donated 20,000 guilders toward the reconstruction of the National Theater; heir apparent Rudolf and his wife Stefanie gave 5,000 guilders, and Archduke Ludwig Viktor, 1,000 guilders.

The Bohemian nobility also gave generously. A list of postfire benefactors records seven princes and 27 countesses and counts, and individual donations of up to 4,000 guilders. Overall, however, the nobility played a lesser role than in the 1850s and 1860s. Some families had disassociated themselves from the theater initiative; others proved more cautious the second time around. The Young Czechs, who, like the Galician democrats around Dobrzański, opposed the aristocracy on principle, were partly to blame for this. Národní listy, for example, claimed that the “Czech and Moravian people” had done far more for the cohesion of the Bohemian Lands than the aristocracy, implying that the aristocracy was not part of the Czech nation. For their part, the nobility did not identify with the new wave of Czech nationalism, which was language oriented and increasingly ethnically exclusive. Aristocrats benevolently subscribed to boxes in the Provisional Theater but preferred to patronize the Estates Theater, where they were among their own kind. Some Jewish families, who were more assimilated into Prague’s majority society than the Jews in Lemberg, also made notable contributions.

As well as private donors, some institutions contributed to the rebuilding of the theater. The provincial diet donated a total of 208,000 guilders for the royal box, the chandelier in the auditorium, and improved fire precautions and sanitation. The city council and the Prague savings bank each donated 50,000 guilders, and the fire insurance policy yielded 275,000 guilders. In this way, then, a number of large and very many small contributions made up the total of 2.18 million guilders required for the construction and reconstruction of the National Theater. Interestingly, these data destroy the myth that the Czech people carried the cost of their national theater alone.

On the outside, the rebuilt Národní Divadlo appeared almost exactly like its predecessor. A grand neorenaissance house, it called to mind Bohemia’s last period of sovereignty, when Prague was the residence of the Habsburgs. But inside, the design sparked a controversy. It struck a compromise between the old and the new world; between a classic box-theater and a civic theater. While there were nearly 40 boxes in three balconies directly adjoining the stage, the mid-section of the balconies facing the stage contained rows of seats where the audience could sit shoulder to shoulder. The orchestra level was similarly arranged, with comfortable armchairs near the stage.
Other opera houses and above all the Semper Theater had proven how seating arrangement influenced audience behavior and listening culture. In a theater with boxes, visitors could come and go as they pleased and behave in the boxes however they liked. An audience in open seating, however, was more obliged to conform to social norms. For many years, the European nobility regarded the action on stage as peripheral and gossiped, ate, or slept during performances. A certain Count Schönborn was notorious for his loud snoring during performances at the Provisional Theater. The burghers in Berlin, Paris, Vienna, and other major opera cities, by contrast, had urged audiences to focus on the stage as early as the prerevolutionary era. The arrangement of the seating, then, not only allowed for
demonstrations of status but also signified which section of society dictated how to behave in the theater and listen to opera.

In the light of its political relevance, then, the seating arrangement in the National Theater was the subject of fierce debates after the fire. In fall 1881, almost 500 petitioners from Prague and the immediate vicinity wrote in an open letter published in Divadelní listy: “In the name of the Czech students, teachers, and the majority of the citizens, in the name of the Czech country dwellers and working people, we demand that the gallery is changed to be befitting to all and the orchestra level enlarged for standing even if it limits the amount of seating for the aristocracy and the wealthy.”41

Once again, the broad mass of minor donors were claiming their share in the National Theater. And eventually the National Theater Association agreed to changes to the outdated auditorium.42 The standing-room area was extended to accommodate 800 (as opposed to seating for 1073), which chiefly benefited the lower middle class. In addition, all the circles right up to the fourth were decorated in the same way, in symbolic recognition of the equality of all theater-goers, from the humblest to the wealthiest. The figurehead of the National Theater Association, Old Czech party leader and experienced political strategist František Ladislav Rieger, aligned himself with Divadelní listy when he declared in November 1881: “We can say that our National Theater, as it now stands, is the most democratic in the world. Nowhere else does the audience in the least expensive seats have such a good view of the stage.”43 While this was not strictly true, since the Semper Opera’s expansive orchestra level, elliptical seating arrangement and set-back partitions between the boxes were probably more “democratic,” nobody would quibble with Rieger’s attempt to assert the importance of the National Theater. The Czech elites’ belief in the democratic nature of their main theater transcended all party boundaries.

In spite of this, the Národní divadlo’s second inauguration was also reserved for an exclusively elite public. Unlike in 1881, however, the theater’s directors were not prepared to make any concessions for the Habsburgs. When Crown Prince Rudolf and his wife once again wavered on the date, and not even Prince Jiří Lobkowitz was able to secure their confirmation, the opening ceremony took place without them.44 Rieger, moreover, insisted on his choice of inaugural work. Lobkowitz was in favor of Dimitrij by Antonín Dvořák, a grand opera with no politically sensitive content. But the National Theater Association had chosen the opera Libuše, which Smetana had written especially for the occasion. It was set in the historical Czech past and extolled the glory and legend of the Bohemian crown. The opera ends with the legendary queen Libuše prophesying a magnificent future for the Czechs to majestic music. Crown Prince Rudolf would have understood this opera as a call to accept the crown of St. Wenceslas. Thus, to avoid offense when he attended on the seventh night, Dimitrij was performed instead.
The second premiere of *Libuše* on November 18, 1883 was in many respects a touching scene. The ailing Bedřich Smetana sat among the audience to watch the performance of his opera, although his deafness prevented him from hearing it. But the audience applauded his majestic soundscapes and recurring coronation motif all the more heartily. The opera’s portrayal of the historical nation and its symbolic legends realized one of the Czech elites’s highest political aims, at least on the stage of the National Theater. Opera became a substitute for politics and provided a source of strength for the nation to continue its struggle for equality.45

Not only that, the opening was a resounding financial success. The National Theater Association raised the cost of tickets to six times the usual price, making the most expensive box seats 50 guilders and the cheapest tickets for the orchestra level 5 guilders—the cost of feeding an average Prague family for a week. Tickets for the second and third performances cost on average two-and-a-half times more than usual.46 These profits allowed the association to set aside a reserve fund for the future.

While the lower classes remained outside the theater, they celebrated in their own way. Despite the cold, several thousand people gathered in the streets of Prague’s old town to mark the occasion. In the rural parts of the Czech Lands, those who had donated toward the National Theater placed a lit candle in their window as a symbol of Enlightenment.47 "Národ sobě—“the nation unto itself”—reads the legend over the stage of the National Theater. The Czech nation had created its own theater.

Notes

1. See *Dějiny českého divadla*, vol. 2, 311. On the social composition of the committee, see Rak, *Divadlo jako*, 50–51.
3. This book uses the term Czech National Theater although official documents generally refer to a Bohemian (*böhmisch*) National or State Theater. On the various appeals for donations, see the governorship’s files in the National Archive, PM 1850–54, 2-23-4, č 49-50, and the archive of the National Museum.
6. The Czech and German-language formulations of this appeal can be found in NA (National Archive, formerly Central State Archive), PM 9, 858. The German version refers to a “Bohemian” (*böhmisch*) nation and national theater.
7. This shows that František Černý’s theory that the nobility in Bohemia made “only a very insignificant” contribution to the construction of the National Theater is wrong (Černý, *Idea Národního*, 21).
10. The takings on this evening totaled a record 600 guilders (later to be broken). See Kadlec, *Družstva*, 22.
11. On the development of Czech drama after 1848, see the comprehensive anthology *Dějiny českého divadla* III.
13. Jan Havránek’s statistics show that over 34 percent of the operas performed 1862–1883 were French, a quarter Italian, a good fifth Czech, and just under a sixth German. See Havránek, *Společenské*, 206.
15. See the statistics in Kimball, *The Czech*, 123.
18. For a complete overview, see Storck, *Kulturnation*, 223.
19. On this procession, see *Národní listy*, May 16, 1868, 4; May 18, 1868, 2.
21. See *Národní listy*, May 18, 1868, 3.
22. For a complete record of the speeches see *Národní listy*, May 19, 1868, 1–2; May 20, 1868, 1–2.
23. See also *Národní listy*.
24. On this and Vienna’s failure to compromise with the Czechs see Křen, *Konfliktgemeinschaft*, 144–68.
25. See Smaha, *Dělalí jsme*, 109–10. Rabagas also caused feelings to run high in Lemberg, where democrats rejected the piece as a “disgraceful reaction against everything that is free and noble.” See “Kronika,” *Gazeta Narodowa*, March 7, 1873, 3.
27. See Kadlec, *Družstva*, 87–92.
28. See Kadlec, *Družstva*, 80. On the political conflicts surrounding the National Theater see also Kváček, *Společenskopolitické zápasy*.
29. Quoted in Heidler, *Díl II*, no. 369, 145.
30. Entrance fees were also drastically raised. Tickets for the second, third, and fourth performances in the new theater cost twice as much as usual; at least 50 kreuzers for a regular seat and one guilder or more for an armchair in the orchestra level. See NA, Fond ND, Sign. D. 104/111, “minutes of the managing committee (spravný výbor)” (hereafter MMC) of May 14, 1881.
31. For criticism of the opening festivities, see *Divadelní listy*, April 25, 1881.
34. An exact breakdown of the donations from district councils, institutions, societies, and individuals is given in the appendix of Šubert, *Národní divadlo*. See also Pešek, *Sbírky*, 212.
37. See the complete list of all donations in Šubert, *Národní divadlo*, appendix.
40. On the historical references made by the various historicist architectural styles, see Marek, ed., *Bauen für die Nation*. By contrast, the new German theater was built in a neo-Baroque style, citing the era which Prague’s Germans believed to be the monarchy’s and Bohemia’s historical prime. On the architecture of this playhouse, see Hilm-er, *Česka divadelni*, 42–43.

42. See “Opravy v Národním divadle,” České Noviny, Aug. 23, 1881, 1.


44. See the correspondence between Lobkowitz and Rieger in Heidler, Listářy, Díl II, 212–13.

45. Reports on the opening performance appeared in all the major Czech daily newspapers on Nov. 19 and 20, 1883.

46. A full list of prices is given in *Divadelní listy*, Dec. 7, 1883, 262.

47. See “Národ sobie,” Dziennik Polski, Oct. 4, 1900, 3.