The Association for Free Lectures in Mathematics and Physics and its founders

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THE ASSOCIATION FOR FREE LECTURES

IN MATHEMATICS AND PHYSICS

AND ITS FOUNDERS

This monograph deals with the history of the Association for Free Lectures in Mathematics and Physics, the direct successor of which is today's Association of Czech Mathematicians and Physicists. It is not only a reminder of the history, but also an expression of thanks to the four students who founded the Association and greatly contributed to its flourishing. The monograph provides readers with a detailed view of the development of the Czech mathematical community in the 1860's.

The first part of the monograph describes the origin and the development of the first Czech professional association – The Association for Free Lectures in Mathematics and Physics. It was founded by four Czech students of the Faculty of Arts at Prague University – Gabriel Blažek, Josef Finger, Josef Rudolf Vaňous and Josef Laun – on July 22, 1861. It received the official permission of Austrian authorities on March 8th, 1862, and thus it became an association of academic character which was under the direct patronage of the Faculty of Arts. Its members could be only full-time students of mathematics and physics and its aims were to practice lecturing and to support scientific endeavours in the field of mathematics and physics.

The Association was located in Prague and its meetings were held every week. The Association was presided over by an elected president, a vice-president and a secretary. The programme of weekly meetings consisted of holding regular lectures, commenting on individual speeches, discussing proposals to scientific activities, admitting new members and expelling negligent members. The language in which lectures were held was German at first, however, in 1864 Czech started to be dominant although both of the languages were used till 1869. This part of the monograph is based on the studying of the proceedings of the meetings of the Association for Free Lectures in Mathematics and Physics which are stored in the Archive of the Czech Academy, of Houdek's History of Association of Czech Mathematicians and of a number of newspaper reports.

The second part of the monograph is devoted to the lives and work of the four founders of the Association; it presents outlines of their lives and main characteristics of their professional activities. It was completed on the basis of archival research and of studying newspaper and magazine reports.

Gabriel Blažek (1842 – 1910) was born in Borovnice u Chocně, he passed his secondary-school leaving examination at the grammar school of Malá Strana in Prague. In the years 1860 – 1863 he studied at the Faculty of Arts of Prague University and in 1863 – 1864 he studied at Vienna University. In 1964 he passed the examination of qualifications in teaching mathematics and physics.

At this time he was working as an assistant at the Physical Institution of Vienna University. In 1865 he received a PhD degree at that university and was habilitated for all mathematics. He stayed there as a private lecturer until the winter semester of the academic year 1866/67. In 1866 he was appointed an associate professor at Prague Polytechnic and five years later he became a full professor of mathematics with the Czech teaching language. He lead basic courses of mathematics. In the years 1875/76, 1881/82 and 1901/02 he was the rector of the Technical University; in the years 1876/77, 1882/83 and 1902/03 was its vice-rector, and several times he was also the dean of various sections. He retired in 1907. In 1887 he was elected a member of the Imperial Council where he was engaged in problems of education and finance; he was one of the experts in creating the national budget and the national statement of account. He was a member of the Imperial Council for 13 years. From 1889 to 1907 he was also a member of the Provincial Parliament of the Czech Kingdom. Besides all those activities he also worked in various banks; he was the vice-chairman of the Provincial Insurance Fund of Franz Josef I., the president of Prague Credit Bank, a member of the Board of the Workers' Accident Insurance Company, from 1896 the vice-chairman of the Mortgage Bank of the Czech Kingdom and in 1907 he became the general director of that bank. Gabriel Blažek was a successful man, however, he did not contribute markedly into the field of mathematics and physics. He wrote 14 works, 3 in physics and the others in mathematics. None of those works can be classified as original or professional. Most of them are comments on foreign publications or didactic and methodological notes.

Josef Finger (1841–1925) was the most important of all the founders from the point of view of mathematics and physics. He was born in Plzeň, he finished the grammar school there in 1859. In the years 1859 − 1863 he studied at the Faculty of Arts at Prague University. From 1863 to 1865 he was a private teacher. In June 1865 he passed the examination of teaching qualifications. In the years 1865 − 1870 he was teaching at the higher secondary school in Loket. From 1870 to 1874 he was a full teacher of mathematics and physics at a state higher secondary school in Ljubljana, from 1874 − 1876 at a state grammar school in Hernals (a part of Vienna today) and in the years 1876 − 1878 at a higher secondary school in Leopoldstadt near Vienna. In 1875 he received a PhD degree at the Faculty of Arts at Vienna University and in the following year he was habilitated in analytical mechanics there. Until 1890 he lectured as a private lecturer at Vienna University. In 1878 he was appointed an associate professor, and six years later a full professor of pure mechanics and graphical statics at Vienna Polytechnic. In the years 1888 − 1890 he was the dean of the School of Chemistry, in 1895 − 1901 the dean of the Universal Section, in 1901 − 1904 the dean of the Civil Engineering and in 1890/91 he was the Rector. After having retired in 1911 he came to St. Georgen im Attergau where he died. He wrote 30 scientific and didactic works (3 in mathematics, 2 in history, the others in physics). His fields of study were mainly mechanics (statics and dynamics of solid bodies, mass points and their systems) and geometrical methods in physics. Although he did not reach

any significant results of his own, he showed a highly professional approach and wide-ranging knowledge. His most famous book was his textbook of the basics of mechanics Elemente der reinen Mechanic of more than 800 pages which was published in three editions. Finger's pedagogical, methodological and popularisation work contributed to the development of the professional education of the whole generation of Austrian technicians.

Josef Rudolf Vaňaus (1839 − 1910) was born in Komárov u Soběslavi. In 1858 he finished his grammar school in Jindřichův Hradec, in the years 1858 − 1862 he studied at the Faculty of Arts at Prague University. In 1862 he passed the examination of teaching qualifications and in 1864 he received a PhD degree at Prague University. In the years 1862 − 1868 he was a part-time teacher at an academic grammar school in Prague. He unsuccessfully applied for a position at Prague Polytechnic. In 1868 he was appointed a full-time teacher of mathematics and physics at a higher grammar school in Jičín where he held his post until the retirement. He worked in several scientific and patriotic associations, he contributed to spreading ideas of education among people. After his retirement he came to Prague where in 1899 − 1900 he taught mathematics and physics at the private grammar school of the Earl of Straka. Vaňaus wrote 5 works, two of them in physics, three in mathematics, which are of elementary character; they were addressed to secondary-school students. Vaňaus tried to present non-traditional ways of viewing standard matters. He considerably supported the development of the Czech science as he donated all his savings to the Czech Academy and other institutions.

Josef Laun (1837 − 1915) was born in Herrendorf (today's Kněževes u Rakovníka). In the years 1858 − 1862 he studied at the Faculty of Arts at Prague University, in 1858 − 1862 at Prague Polytechnic. In 1864 he unsuccessfully applied for a post at Prague Polytechnic. At that time he was a teacher at the grammar school in Rijeka. From 1865 till 1868 he taught at the grammar school in Zagreb, then he left the teaching profession. He studied at the Faculty of Law at Prague University and afterwards started to run a farm in Kněževes. During his short professional career he wrote two articles, one in mathematics and one in biology. At the end of the monograph there are factographic supplements which illustrate the history of the Association and scientific activities of their founders. This part is based on Houdek's History (the data were verified and completed by the information obtained from the proceedings of the meetings of the Association), official lists of lectures at several universities, referential magazines and other sources.

The last part of the monograph is a picture appendix consisting of reproductions of some documents and photographs.

Translated by Štěpánka Bilová