

Jiří Veselý

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A Mathematical Anniversary

JIŘÍ VESELÝ

Praha

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This text is based on the lecture delivered on June 30, 2011 commemorating the 100th anniversary of the building of the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics at Karlov, Prague.

This year we have a chance to remember centennial anniversary of “maths” in Prague. This was the nickname of a building which is used by the *Faculty of Mathematics and Physics of Charles University* at Prague since its foundation in 1952. The nickname is no longer used but at a certain time it was appropriate. The following text will be devoted to the history of this building. We have to start little bit earlier on.

In 1882 Charles-Ferdinand University in Prague was divided into the German Charles-Ferdinand University and a the Czech Charles-Ferdinand University but the majority of buildings were given to the German University (GU). These Universities were independent and all equipment of the Institutes of the former University was also divided between them in an unequal way. The CU consisted of two parts: The Faculty of Philosophy (FP) and The Faculty of Law (GU had four Faculties). Thus the only professor of mathematics at the CU *František Josef Studnička* (1836–1903) was a member of staff of FP. Professors of natural sciences at CU also belonged to the staff of FP. At the time their prevailing interest lied in the possibility of teaching their subjects in Czech but slowly this common task was replaced by an effort to reach the scientific level of other European Universities in their various specialties. Very poor equipment, a fatal lack of proper lecture halls and the rapid growth in number of students were other factors which helped professors of FP to follow the idea of building new buildings for CU. There was a special committee at FP which took permanent care about this task. Its leading personality was a young Professor of physics *Čeněk (Vincenc) Strouhal* (1850–1922).

Charles University, Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, Sokolovská 83, 186 75 Praha, Czech Republic

E-mail address: vesely@karlin.mff.cuni.cz

After studying Strouhal became an assistant of Professor Friedrich Kohlraush (1840–1910) in the newly created institute of experimental physics in Würzburg. He spent there 6 years and since 1878 he was a Privatdozent of the University of Würzburg. He was a good scientist and so he was offered a position in the USA. In 1882 he was called to CU at Prague as a Professor of experimental physics. Strouhal mainly devoted the rest of his life to pedagogical and organizational work. He was a Czech who felt this to be his duty, his service to the Czech nation.

The first years of the CU were rather difficult but the lack of finance was the main reason of permanent postponing of the solution of mounting problems. New hope for the construction of buildings for institutes of CU arose when the Prague baroque walls started (in 1875) to be removed. A place was found not too far from the present location of the building and the University hoped to get it but the place was sold to some private investors by a bank. Thanks to the initiative of Count *Franz Anton Fürst von Thun and Hohenstein* (1847–1916) who served as the Habsburg's Governor of his native Bohemia and the influential politician *Georg Christian, The Prince of Lobkowitz* (1835–1908) the state sold a piece of land for the institutes of both Universities (now this part of Prague 2, the district Albertov, is sometimes called University City). Formerly it belonged to the Augustinian Monastery and was used as vineyards.

When a chance to build buildings for CU appeared Strouhal started to plan a new building for some of the institutes of natural sciences of CU, among which was a new modern Institute of Experimental Physics. An appropriate place seemed to be very close to the Church of Charles the Great founded by the Czech King and the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire *Charles IV* in 14th century. Soon after it was found that at the somewhat slope place at Karlov it is not possible to construct a building which would be big enough to house all planned Institutes. Since according to the wishes of Vienna it was necessary to divide the area into two parts by a street ending at the bottom of a long staircase, possible solutions were limited. After long negotiations it was decided to construct in the vicinity of the Church two buildings on both sides of the staircase: The first one for the Institute of Experimental Physics and the second one for the Institute of Theoretical Physics, the Institute of Mathematics, the Institute of Mineralogy and the Institute of Meteorology. Both buildings are now on the addresses Ke Karlovu 5 (P) and Ke Karlovu 3 (M) (the present name of the street was given to it in the year 1947).

The first of those buildings P was constructed from 1905 to 1907. In the meanwhile tensions in the FP were growing and in 1908 its staff asked for the splitting of FP into FP and the *Faculty of Natural Sciences* (FS) but this plan was rejected by the *Ministry of Culture and Teaching* at Vienna. Behind those repeated discussions on plans one senses a struggle for getting a proper space for Institutes as soon as possible. It was even necessary to rent some rooms which were used for lectures and there were also students demonstrations for improvement of their study conditions. Nevertheless the construction of the second building only started in 1907 and was finished in 1911. The Ministry of Culture and Teaching decided that the mineralogy

department in the constructed building would be replaced by zoology. Strouhal was very disappointed and left the committee for the construction of new buildings. His prediction that the solution is not good was ignored.

František Kolářek (1851–1913), Professor of theoretical physics, was even afraid that in M there will be no space for his institute. He had to spend some time in Brno having not been able to find good conditions for work in Prague. This gap of two years caused him these little troubles with finding place for his Institute, but it had also one positive effect: In Brno he met the mathematicians *Karel Petr* (1868–1950) and *Jan Sobotka* (1862–1931). When in 1903 it was necessary to arrange the education of mathematics at CU, they were called to Prague. And due to their attitude to teaching they were also responsible for the growing level of mathematical education in Czechoslovakia – they carefully educated aspiring secondary schools professors.

In the end M was finished and ready to move into. At a meeting of professors of FP in 1912 (one of them was e.g. *Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk* (1850–1937)) the name of the new building was agreed: *Mathematicko-přírodovědné ústavy české univerzity u Karlova*, i.e. *Math and Sciences Institutes of Czech University at Karlov*. Why so late? Building was finished at the end of 1909 but again the insufficient financial hinterland and the lack of equipment played a role. The necessary sum for it was released at the end of 1910 and M was finished at the end of 1911. Lectures were scheduled to the building mostly next school year.

In the building there was a reading room for students, When P was finished Strouhal moved the library of the Society of Czech Mathematicians and Physicists (founded 1862) to P (he was its President since the beginning of 20th century). In 1925 the library was moved to M. The building also served from 1920 as a site of the state institution for meteorological measurements (one of many stations for such measurements belonging to *The Czech Hydrometeorological Institute* (CHMI) is located in M even today). After the foundation of Czechoslovakia the name of the C. K. Czech University of Prague was changed to the *Charles University*. Also the (FP) was divided and *Faculty of Natural Sciences* was created. Among Professors of mathematics who worked in the building were i.g. *Bohumil Bydžovský* (1880–1969; 1920), *Miloš Kössler* (1884–1961; 1927), *Vojtěch Jarník* (1897–1970; 1935), *Vladimír Kořínek* (1899–1981; 1935), *Eduard Čech* (1893–1960; 1928 – Brno), *Miroslav Katětov* (1918–1995; 1953). Two others, *Emil Schoenbaum* (1882–1967) and *Václav Hlavatý* (1894–1969), emigrated in 1939 or 1948, respectively.

During the WW II when Nazis closed Czech universities both buildings at Karlov were used by the German University of Prague. In P high level (but secret, since it was connected with noctovisors) research into luminescence was conducted. The research was led by *Bernhard Gudden* (1926–1945) who came to Prague from Erlangen. In 1945 he was interned and after a short time he died. Members of his research group played later important role in the development of semiconductors.

In M there was another Institute of experimental Physics led by *Wilhelm Albert von Meyer* (1905–1983). At the end of the war he was also interned, but somewhat

later he was again Professor of physics and also the Dean of one faculty at the *University of Hanover*. Heads of other institutes of GU located in M also found positions in post-war Germany.

Since GU became the Reich's institution it was abolished after the war. By one of the decrees of *Eduard Beneš* (1884–1948), the second President of Czechoslovakia, it was done to the date of closing of Czech Universities in 1939. Buildings of the GU of Prague were given to Charles University. It brought a chance to move zoology from M to a building at Viničná Street where a century ago *Albert Einstein* worked and which hosted the Department of Mathematics of GU during the war.

After the WW II building M was used by the Department of Mathematics, the Department of Theoretical Physics and some others. Also the library was there. Probably from the time its nick name “Matika” (= Math) was used while the neighbouring building P was known as “Fyzika” (= Physics) since all other experimental physics departments were concentrated there.

The *Faculty of Mathematics and Physics* was established in 1952. Today it has other buildings which are scattered all over Prague. Currently the mathematical departments are in a building in the Prague district of Karlin and the Dean's office, the Library of the physics departments and a few physics departments found a place in M and so the nickname Math gained a different meaning. The building M was repaired, all previous insensitive inner changes were removed and so it has been restored and is very nice. Its shape also shows its age but despite of being a hundred years old it is in a perfect form.