

Plzeň patriot JUDr. Richard Krofta (1873–1958): On the life of a prominent person in the socio-political life of Plzeň in the first half of the 20th century / Plzeňský patriot JUDr. Richard Krofta (1873–1958): Ze života významné osobnosti společensko-politického života Plzně v první polovině 20. století.

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Abstract

This paper presents the biography of a prominent person from the Plzeň patriotic and revivalist Krofta family, JUDr. Richard Krofta. Richard Krofta held important positions in the First Republic financial sector and as president of the Union of Savings Banks, as well as a leading figure in the Plzeň Bank and City Savings Bank in Plzeň, he was instrumental in increasing the prosperity of the banking sector in the newly emerging Czechoslovak state. But he was far from being a mere banker and influential entrepreneur: on the contrary, his name featured in every significant patriotic, social or cultural activity in the region. Just like his father, he was used to putting the interests of his nation high above personal interests and did not spare the necessary efforts or even the sacrifices this entailed. This paper is based on sources from the family archives and personal reminiscences of contemporaries from the wider Krofta-Svátek family circle.

Keywords: Richard Krofta; Plzeň in the 19th and 20th centuries; National Party and Old Czech Party; City Savings Bank in Plzeň.

Introduction

Hitherto little has been written about JUDr. Richard Krofta, despite his being a prominent person in the Czechoslovak financial sector during the First Republic, as well as an influential figure in cultural, social and political events in Plzeň at that time.

And yet his legacy in the city, just like that of the entire Krofta and Svátek families, is unmistakable. His father, JUDr. Josef Krofta, was an important Plzeň burgomaster, a deputy in the Landtag and Imperial Council for the Old Czech Party, a patriot, national revivalist and patron of the arts. Richard Krofta's brother Kamil was a leading Czech historian, First Republic ambassador and minister of foreign affairs. Both of them, along with another brother, Otakar, were involved in the anti-fascist resistance movement. The lives and legacy of Josef Krofta and Kamil Krofta can be researched relatively easily thanks to sources stored in the Plzeň City Archives, Archives of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic or the Archives of Charles University. The private papers of Richard Krofta, however, are nowhere available to the public. This is one reason why the opportunity to study this interesting person via personal archives and with the help of reminiscences from his contemporaries was an irresistible challenge to the researcher. The archives in question are the private papers of Richard Krofta, which are in the possession of his granddaughter Jana Bobková and great-granddaughter Johana Matějčková. In addition to family photographs, documents and correspondence, the material also includes some very interesting reminiscences of Richard Krofta in the form of a typescript. It was these reminiscences, along with the important commentaries of contemporary witnesses, which provided the basic sources of information for this paper.

Richard was born 27 April 1873 in the house of his great-grandparents Svátek at no. 70, Palacký Avenue. He studied at the Czech realschule grammar school and passed his leaving examinations there in 1891. Immediately afterwards, he enrolled from 1 October for one-year voluntary service in the Cheb Infantry unit no. 73 which had a garrison in Plzeň, as Richard Krofta himself recalls: "*First before forgetting school discipline and before growing accustomed to the academic freedom of university, I fulfilled my obligations under military discipline.*"²¹³ He obtained the rank of reserve officer but did not have to participate in the first world war as he was running the Plzeň City Savings Bank which was, as he himself put it, "kriegswichtig" – in other words strategically important in wartime.²¹⁴ In the autumn of 1892, immediately after his father's death, he began to study law in Prague at the then

²¹³ Private archives of Mrs Johana Matějčková, great-granddaughter of Richard Krofta, R. KROFTA, *Ze starcovy paměti a zásuvky. Výstřížek ze života jedné rodiny a její doby*, p. 55.

²¹⁴ Interview with Mrs Johana Matějčková, great-granddaughter of Richard Krofta, 20. 4. 2016.

Karlo-Ferdinand University. Instead of his father, he was accompanied there by his father's deputy in the office of burgomaster and family friend JUDr Václav Peták. Peták introduced him to several teachers and arranged his accommodation in Prague with Terezie Nebeská, widow of the national revivalist poet Václav Bolemír Nebeský. Thanks to her and also to many interesting visitors at the elderly lady's house, the young Krofta became acquainted with a number of prominent people of the then Prague intellectual patriots such as the Čelakovský or Musil families who were linked with Josef Jungmann. The second mentioned family proved pivotal since it was here, in the wider family circle, that Krofta later chose his future bride, Olga Strettiová (1880-1928). She came from the well-known Stretti family of Prague artists, originally from Italy and connected to West Bohemia through the monastery in Plasy. Richard Krofta became acquainted with his wife-to-be through Marie Musilová (1876-1953), the great granddaughter of Josef Jungmann who had married Dr. Bohuš Stretti, brother of Olga Strettiová. By coincidence Bohuš Stretti had been in the same class as Krofta at the Plzeň grammar school.²¹⁵ It was Marie who would visit Mrs Nebeská and thus became acquainted there with Richard Krofta. They subsequently became lifelong friends.

Richard Krofta was an excellent student and in 1897 had met the requirements for the *promotio sub auspiciis*.²¹⁶ However, the then Dean of the Law Faculty, Professor JUDr. Jaromír Čelakovský, dissuaded his favourite student from this option because of the expense involved and Richard Krofta graduated in all types of law in the standard fashion on 30 October 1897. He received an offer to remain at the university and pursue an academic career, with Professor JUDr. Emil Ott being especially persuasive. But Richard declined the offer with thanks. His reasons were primarily financial: he knew he would soon want to marry since he was already in love with Olga Strettiová and had asked the family for her hand, albeit she was still only 16 years of age, since he planned to make her his wife as soon as the law permitted. By that time he was determined to become an existentially secure man,

²¹⁵ MUDr. Bohuš Stretti was the brother of artists Viktor and Jaromír Stretti and son of MUDr. Karel Stretti, originally personal doctor to Prince Richard Metternich in Plasy.

²¹⁶ *Sub auspiciis* was an old form of ceremonial promotion, whereby an excellent student received an academic title under the auspices of the head of state, who may have attended the graduation ceremony by proxy through his representative but his very patronage was a guarantee of the graduate's academic achievements.

which the position of a teacher, even at a university, could not guarantee in the same way as a career in law: thus he decided for the latter option. He managed to obtain a candidate judge position at the provincial criminal court on Karlovo Square in Prague with an annual remuneration of 500 gulden.

From 1898 he began work as a candidate judge at the regional court in Plzeň but then renounced a judicial career²¹⁷ and started working as an articled clerk, first in the advocate's office of JUDr. Josef Schmid, then in the office of the future Plzeň burgomaster JUDr. Matouš Mandl. He himself stated, however, that the greatest practical experience was protecting the family property while representing the firm of his uncles Kopecký and Svátek in bankruptcy proceedings.²¹⁸ In 1904 Richard Krofta joined an institution co-founded by his father, the Plzeň City Savings Bank. A vacancy appeared here when JUC. František Štengl retired due to ill health. Krofta began as an articled clerk but by 1906 had become the manager after the sudden death in that year of the erstwhile manager, JUC. Jan Kolbaba. As a articled clerk Krofta had worked together with Kolbaba the whole time and acquitted himself well, offering interesting suggestions for optimisation of the insurance company's internal structure. He worked conscientiously in this position for 24 years until his retirement in 1930. Under his management the insurance company flourished, expanded, modernised itself and acquired newly rebuilt premises, including an armour-plated cellar area. From 1926 Krofta was also chairman of the Association of Czech Insurance Companies.

In 1899 Richard Krofta was finally able to marry his beloved Olga. After the wedding, the couple lived in Plzeň in a flat at no. 22, Nerudova Street. The following

²¹⁷ Richard Krofta himself describes how he was disillusioned by the judiciary: *"The courts disappointed me. They produced different verdicts than we were taught by our university professors. The first civil verdict in writing at one court case, which I as a candidate judge had elaborated based on the concept of Randa, was not endorsed by the senate. They stated it was a decent seminar paper but inappropriate for a verdict. According to them I was dealing with the inner motivations of those concerned, their intentions and wishes, whereas the court could only judge the facts. In another case the court ignored my complaint as a representative of the damaged party only because, although I had submitted the complaint in writing, at the oral hearing I did not repeat it but only referred to it. This, however, was a delicate case involving responsibility of the court itself for an unjustified imposition of bankruptcy proceedings."* Private archives of Mrs Johana Matějčková, great-granddaughter of Richard Krofta, R. KROFTA, *Ze starcovy paměti a zásuvky. Výstřížek ze života jedné rodiny a její doby*, p. 55.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

year their first child, daughter Zdena, was born; three years later came another daughter, Olga; in 1905 they had a son, Josef; then finally the youngest, Ferdinand, born in 1915. The last-mentioned, however, died shortly after his first birthday. Richard Krofta also outlived his son Josef, who died in 1848 short of his 44th birthday, leaving behind a 13-year old son Mario. For grandfather Richard, Mario thus replaced both lost sons and continued the male line of the family as the inheritor of the Krofta surname.²¹⁹

The influence of Richard Krofta on Czechoslovak banking was considerable and assessed retrospectively as very favourable. As chairman of the Association of Savings Banks he was collaborating with similar institutions all over Europe. He made valuable acquaintances in the financial sector of the First Republic – at the Ministry of Finance, National Bank, Rediscount and Lombard Institute, Post Office Savings Bank, Bank Control Unit, Association of Trustee Savings Banks as well as with representatives of banks. Many functionaries at these institutions repeatedly visited Richard Krofta at the family estate in Richardov, where they also met Kamil Krofta. Krofta even organised an interesting annual event every June, namely a walk from Prague to Richardov known as “the penitent’s pilgrimage” and the afore-mentioned gentlemen willingly took part in it.²²⁰

Had it not been for Krofta’s principled stance, a result of his father’s upbringing, he could even have become Minister of Finance in Jan Malypetr’s government, which followed the resignation of Udržal’s government in October 1932. Malypetr, as the new prime minister, wanted to replace Dr. Karel Trapl, governor of the Post Office Savings Bank, in his role as Minister of Finance. First, however, he needed to settle the obligations which the previous government had towards the Post Office Savings Bank. With this in mind, he approached Richard Krofta with the offer

²¹⁹ Interview with Mrs Johana Matějčková, great-granddaughter of Richard Krofta, 20. 4. 2016.

²²⁰ “*On these annual ‘June’ pilgrimages to Richardov, it was a pleasure to listen to old friends like authorised representative Pichl [vice-chairman of the Prague City Savings Bank – author’s note] and governor Dr. Pospíšil [authorised minister and governor of the National Bank – author’s note] telling their sharp-witted stories to the chairman of the Association of Czechoslovak Savings Banks, Dr. Richard Krofta. Dr. Krofta, who was then Minister of Foreign Affairs, would add some gentle remarks of his own and was clearly enjoying himself enormously.*” J. WILD [general manager of the Association of Savings Bank – author’s note], Obituary to JUDr. Vilém Pospíšil. In: *Ročenka Slovanského ústavu za léta 1939-1946*, vol. 12, Praha 1947.

of a ministerial seat on condition that the Association of Saving Banks would provide the state with a loan of 900 million crowns to cover the afore-mentioned debt. After some hesitation, Richard Krofta explained that it was not possible for savings banks to loan such an enormous sum and Malypetr thus retained Karel Trapl as his finance minister.²²¹ Incidentally, Eduard Beneš also considered Richard Krofta as a possible finance minister and in 1932 sent a message via his brother Kamil to ask whether, in case of need, he would accept a ministerial post. Beneš added that the matter had already been discussed with President Masaryk and Masaryk was in favour. On 29 October 1932 Richard Krofta was summoned to a meeting at Czernin Palace in Prague, where he presented his ministerial programme.²²² Between 20 and 30 October of that year, Krofta's name appeared in the press several times in connection with the Ministry of Finance.

After the German occupation it was clear that the openly patriotic Richard Krofta would not be able to remain at the head of the Association of Savings Banks for longer than was necessary. The Central Association of Finance, as the leading financial organ in the protectorate, selected and nominated docent Albín Žák as chairman of the Association. Richard Krofta learned of his suspension starting from June 1942 via the press.²²³

The scope of Richard Krofta's activities was considerable. Here mention should be made at least of his role as a co-founder and until 1933 a member of the board of Plzeň Bank (together with JUDr. Bernard Guldener and JUDr. Matouš Mandl), further his role as a member of the administrative board of the Burghers' Brewery in Plzeň, a member of the administrative board of the Živnostenská Bank 1933-1941, and a member of the supervisory board of the public limited company Novokdyňská Laundry for the Smoothing and Combing of Yarn. (He accepted the last mentioned role and continued in it until 1939, as he himself said, for patriotic motives so that a predominantly German firm with Austrian capital and French people on the

²²¹ The situation was captured by a caricature portraying premier Malypetr holding a bird in his hand with Trapl's head and birds in a bush with the heads of Richard Krofta and the then leading authorities on finance and trade Karel Engliš, Antonín Basch, Jaroslav Preis a Ladislav Novák. *Hospodářský rozhled* (weekly), 23. 12. 1932.

²²² Private archives of Mrs Johana Matějčková, great-granddaughter of Richard Krofta, R. KROFTA, *Ze starcovy paměti a zásuvky. Výstřížek ze života jedné rodiny a její doby*, p. 61.

²²³ Interview with Mrs Johana Matějčková, great-granddaughter of Richard Krofta, 20. 4. 2016.

administrative board was at least partially Czechified.)²²⁴ For a long time Richard Krofta resisted offers to become politically active, bearing in mind the wishes of his father that he should never follow his example and devote himself to politics; nevertheless, he could not just stand aside and ignore events around him. By his very nature he was a politically minded person with firm, clear opinions and more or less political upbringing. After starting work at the savings bank in 1904, at the suggestion of manager Kolbaba, he finally agreed to join the Young Czech Party, also known as the National Liberal Party. Krofta considered this party to be the successor of the now defunct National Party (Old Czech Party), which for him was closely tied to his father's legacy. He remained a member but without any function and when after 1918 the party transformed itself into the Czech State Right Democratic Party, then later to the National Democratic Party, he automatically became its member. He did, however, have certain reservations concerning the stances and opinions of some of the party's leading names. After the party dissolved in 1945, Krofta, like most national democrats, transferred to the party amongst those allowed to operate whose programme had most in common with national democracy, namely the Czech People's Party. Krofta offered his services as a lawyer in the legal section. In December 1946 he was even elected to the regional presidium of the party and to the plenary of the regional committee of the National Front.

Just like his father, Richard Krofta also was active in many cultural, educational and charity institutions, such as Sokol, Měšťanská Beseda, Radbuza, National Pošumavská Association, Association for the Support of Poor School Pupils in Plzeň, Curatorium of the Plzeň Business Academy, Association of Creative Artists in Prague, Club of Artists in Prague, Association for the Protection of Mariánské Týnice u Kralovic or the Slavonic Institute in Prague.²²⁵ An accurate characterisation of Richard Krofta's legacy, and in fact also that of the whole Krofta family, accompanies a caricature published under the name Nemo in the weekly publication *Hospodářský rozhled* from 1932.

“Richard Krofta embodies local patriotism. While his brother Kamil has become a European in the true sense of the word (both in theory and practice), Dr.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

²²⁵ Interview with Mrs Johana Matějčková, great-granddaughter of Richard Krofta, 20. 4. 2016.

Richard Krofta, who took over his father's advocate's office, has remained a Pilsener. This is, as it were, in the family tradition, for JUDr. Josef Krofta was a Plzeň burgomaster and deputy for Plzeň in the Imperial Council and a fighter for Czech rights in a city that at the time was still very much German. In his advocate's office the Plzeň economic 'Mafia' arose, which is now successfully led by Dr. Richard Krofta and whose slogan is 'Czech Plzeň!' The advantage is that this Czech group of local patriots can rely on economically healthy firms, primarily Plzeň Bank, City Savings Bank and above all the brewery. For a number of years, along with brother Otakar and general manager Plášil, Richard Krofta was leading a dogged, albeit quiet and almost underground, battle for Plzeň beer – and in the end, as we now know, he was victorious. Today Plzeň beer is in Czech hands."²²⁶

The Krofta-Svátek family undoubtedly ranked amongst the important patrician circles in Plzeň at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. However, it stood out from the others with its exemplary patriotism and willingness often to sacrifice both personal and family interests for the sake of the emancipation of the nation. Following the example of their father Josef Krofta, all the Krofta sons behaved in this way; however, JUDr. Richard Krofta and his brother Prof. PhDr. Kamil Krofta had a particularly strong impact. JUDr. Richard Krofta was an extraordinarily strong and honourable person, exceptional in his tireless social and educational work, personal courage in two world wars, harsh fate in life, whereby he had to face the loss of many of those close to him, including his beloved wife and son, and still he remained a staunch pillar of the family. After 1948 he and his family found themselves on the side of somewhat stigmatised social groups; nonetheless, even in such times, he managed to maintain his social credit and respect. This paper aims at least to some extent to commemorate an otherwise often overlooked but once prominent person in the modern history of Plzeň.

Conclusion

This paper goes beyond the sphere of finance and banking in Plzeň to look at the life of an important personality in Plzeň regional politics. It aims specifically to provide

²²⁶ *Hospodářský rozhled (týdeník)*, 3. 11. 1932.

some facts concerning the life of JUDr. Richard Krofta, based on information obtained from unique original sources. Incorporating the wider significance of Richard Krofta himself, and the Krofta family, into the overall context of the birth and formation of Czech capital at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries would require further research. The focus of this paper on the family and kinship aspect of Krofta's life is given by the nature of the sources drawn upon. The research showed that, following the death of his father JUDr. Josef Krofta, Richard Krofta gradually became the leading figure within the wider Krofta-Svátek family, as well as a leading figure in Plzeň politics. In contrast to initial expectations, the research showed that in this regard, when judged within the context of the region, Richard Krofta even outshone his brother, PhDr. Kamil Krofta, who was Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Czechoslovak government prior to the Munich Agreement. Understandably, at the time of Kamil Krofta's diplomatic missions and ministerial post, he could not be as active in local politics as Richard, who remained in the city of his birth throughout his entire life. Nonetheless, or perhaps precisely for this reason, in the minds of subsequent generations in Plzeň, Richard has been somewhat overshadowed by his brother. Nowadays the name Richard Krofta is basically unknown amongst the general public – a fact which was confirmed by the research.

The paper also points out sudden changes in the lifestyle of burghers, specifically that of patricians, in Czech cities at the end of the 19th century. Plzeň is a most appropriate example for generalisation: the image of the Krofta-Svátek family circle, depicted here against the background of Richard Krofta's biography, may be considered typical of its time and of large Czech towns and cities. Details from period texts, which are reflected in the study, allow judgements to be made about various aspects of life of the emerging national bourgeoisie of the era, everyday stereotypes, changing perceptions of life values across the three generations covered by the paper, changes in attitudes to gender, religiosity, practices within family links, as well as the solidity and significance of family roots and ties. These played a significant role not only within the narrower circle of Richard Krofta's family, but also within the wider context of national history. The paper shows the close connections with Czechoslovak foreign policy, personified by Kamil Krofta, immediately prior to the Munich agreement and especially with the fate of the two brothers during the period of the German occupation.

The paper was conceived as a partial piece of research for a longer monograph on the significance of the Krofta-Svátek families. It also demonstrates a possible method for analysing personal sources, both written and spoken, within modern biographical studies.

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Family correspondence

Family gallery

Family photographs

Private archives of Mrs Jana Bobková, granddaughter of Richard Krofta:

Svátek-Krofta family tree

Family photographs

Family correspondence

Contemporary witnesses

Jana Bobková (b. 1926), granddaughter of Richarda Krofta. Conversations with the author conducted November–December 2012.

Jana Matějčková (b. 1956), great-granddaughter of Richarda Krofta. Conversations with the author conducted April 2016 in Richardov

Miloslav Kreysa, qualified lawyer (b. 1949), husband of Mrs Jana Matějčková. Conversations with the author conducted April 2016 in Richardov

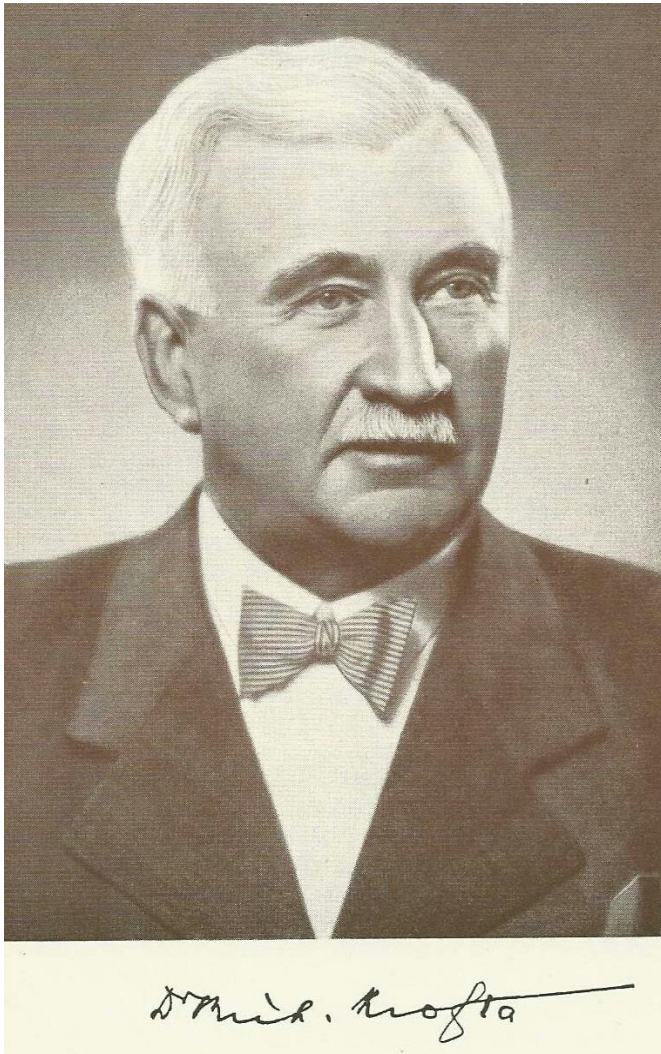
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Danuše Bělohávková (b. 1926), classmate of Richarda Krofta's granddaughter Jana Bobková. Conversations with the author conducted 2008–2016 in Plzeň

Transcript of conversations in the author's archives

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Attachment. *Richard Krofta* (KROFTA, Richard. *Ze starcovy paměti a zásuvky. Výstřížek ze života jedné rodiny a její doby.* 1950. Typescript.)