

International Scene

MARJORIE BARRITT AND NANCY BARTLETT, editors

Czech Archives at the Crossroads: Breaking with the Past

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Abstract: The close ties of the Czechoslovak archival institutions with the ideological superstructure of the past oppressive Communist regime has left the archives vulnerable to attacks in the period of ideological breakdown of Marxism-Leninism throughout the Eastern bloc countries. The future of Czech and Slovak archives will be determined by how fast and thoroughly they disassociate themselves from the untenable ideology and from their own inconvenient past. The major task for archivists today is to rehabilitate, to reform, and to integrate the archival profession into the new social order. The first steps in the right direction have been taken. How Czechoslovak archivistics will meet the challenge of newly regained autonomy under the conditions of Czechoslovakia's strangled economy remains to be seen.

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IN THE RECENT PAST, whenever I read an article about Soviet or Eastern bloc libraries or archives from the pen of a non-Soviet or non-Eastern bloc archivist or librarian, I was struck by the uncritical enthusiasm for the privileged status and high esteem enjoyed by Soviet and East bloc counterparts. Due to their superficial observations, the visitors usually failed to grasp the significance of the illusion of reality, reminiscent of Potemkin villages and villagers. It seemed almost as if the observers, lost in a sea of diversity and contrasting options at home, and accustomed to perennial worries amplified by a sense of the unimportance of their position in a free society, sought some consolation in the alien system. Whatever benefits such a system might have bestowed upon archivists or librarians, it was not worth the price that society paid for the abrogation of the freedom to generate, access, and disseminate information.

It has been ten years since I left Czechoslovakia where I had worked as a librarian at the Historical Library of Teplá Monastery from 1976 to 1982. The Teplá Monastery Historical Library in Western Bohemia, built centuries ago by the Praemonstratensian order, was confiscated by the state after World War II. In many respects the fate of the library and its archives mirrors that of many other historical institutions and archives in my former country. Following the dissolution of Czechoslovakia's monastic orders in 1948, the monastery complex was nationalized and transformed into a military base. While the collections of the library with its historical archives remained relatively intact, the twentieth-century records and administrative papers of the monastery, including the personal libraries of the disbanded members of the order, were vandalized and virtually destroyed. In the aftermath of post-war political changes, the historical library was reduced to a vegetative state. For more than forty years, a staff of three librarians

labored under the shadow of military patronage.

Throughout Czechoslovakia archivists and librarians, who had become state employees, assumed the role of guardians over the "state property." In accordance with the Orwellian maxim "who controls the past, controls the future," the archivists were singled out as guardians of the past and preservers of ideological purity for the future. Access to twentieth-century records was virtually forbidden to free-spirited, independent researchers. Under Czechoslovakia's new archival laws, no research in the archives was permissible unless it was conducted "in the interest of the socialist society and the State."¹

Naturally, under such an arrangement the archivists technically could be held liable for providing access to information that was not in the interest of the socialist state. Users wishing to conduct research considered unrelated to the interests of the state were thus either intimidated by bureaucratic red tape or forced to be evasive in their research requests to avoid curtailed access to the archival collections. Under such conditions the tension between archivists and users was inevitable. Archivists, who were primarily guardians of the "state records" and only secondarily providers of services for users, were unable to accommodate users effectively. By the same token, users were distrustful and inattentive to the problems of the archivists. Often aware only of the bureaucratic procedures and archivists' inflexibility in handling their requests, the users blamed the archivists for all the limits in accessing the archives.

¹Restricted access to archival material was spelled out in section 3, part 11, paragraph 2 of the Czechoslovak Law Code no. 97/1974. The text of this archival law was published in *Archivní Časopis* 24 (1974): 196-204. The paragraph states that "permission to research archival records less than fifty years old cannot be granted [to citizens] if . . . [it] endangers the state or society's interests . . . and access to other archival materials can be declined on the same grounds."



Figure 1: Teplá Monastery (Photograph from Foto archiv Pressfoto GRAFIATISK)

The circumstances under which archivists and librarians lived and worked in communist Czechoslovakia for half a century reflect the paradoxical relationship between the professional attempt to preserve historical continuity and the ideological attempt to discontinue history by obliterating it. Having at one time been a librarian engaged in archival research in this prestigious historical library, I recognize now that my work then offered me an opportunity to test the issues of controlled versus free access to information within the Czech archival system. The following article is but a personal reflection of that past, with an intimate understanding that the current events taking place on the Czech archival scene are, to a great extent, conditioned and dictated by its immediate past.

The unprecedented political events of November and December 1989 in Prague

caught the Czechs by surprise. At the beginning of November no single institution could foresee, much less plan for, the collapse of the ideological structure and the loss of power of a seemingly unshakable regime. Czech archival institutions were no exception. The sudden crash of the totalitarian political system, together with the swift disintegration of its ideological superstructure, engulfed the institutions traditionally closely tied to it, leaving them distressed and uncertain about the near future.

A few months before the Prague "revolution," it would simply have been inconceivable to imagine any archival institution disengaging from the government. For the same reason, it is easy to understand why, to the very end of the old regime, the archivists remained calm on the surface and showed neither a "rev-

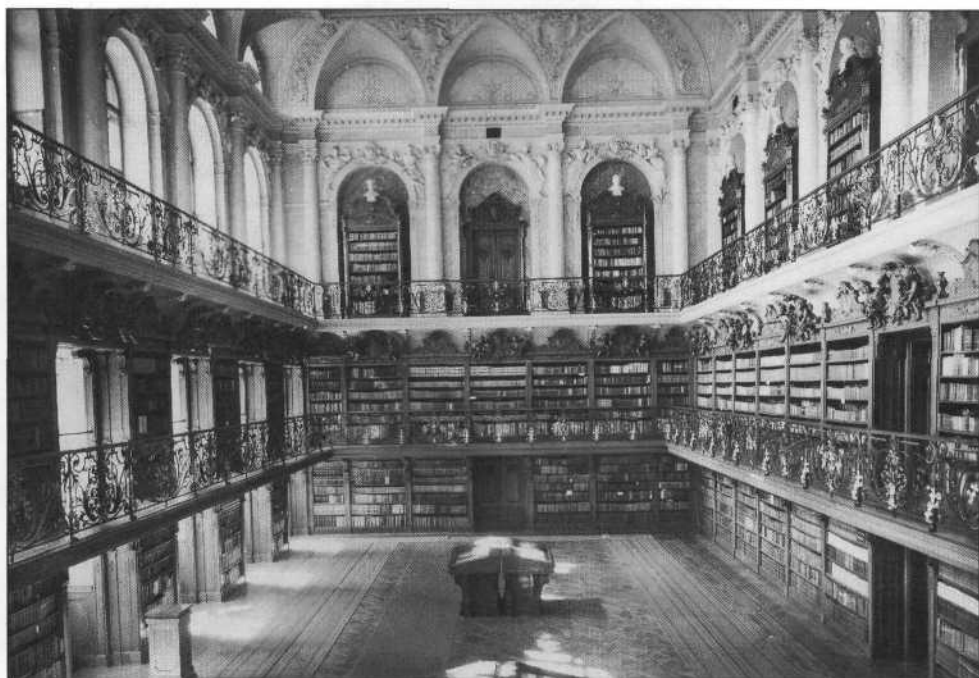


Figure 2: Teplá Monastery Historical Library (Photograph from Nakladatelství Orbis Praha)

olutionary spirit” nor a desire for change. The archivists were too vulnerable and their problems too severe to afford the luxury of dissent before December 1989. But as the ideological cracks in the regime began to show, the catastrophic state of affairs in Czechoslovak archivistics² surfaced immediately after the “velvet revolution” swept the streets of Prague in December.

As always in Europe, history plays an integral part in the current scene. To com-

prehend the present development in Czechoslovak archivistics it is necessary to look back upon the history of the profession during the period of the socialist “build up” of Czechoslovakia and to assess the role of the archives in the Czech political system.

After the February 1948 Communist coup d'état Czechoslovakia underwent a series of organizational changes that gradually transformed the once democratic state into a totalitarian regime of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” These changes reached and deeply affected the organizational and managerial structure of the archival profession in the early 1950s. The centralization and Sovietization of the archives under the guidance of the Czech Ministry of Interior were gradually implemented throughout the Czech and Slovak Republics. The general direction for the future development of the archives was spelled out by statutory en-

²Editors' note: The author's use of archivistics reflects his familiarity with the French word *archivistique*, for which, unfortunately, there is no graceful English equivalent. The *Dictionary of Archival Terminology* (ICA Handbook Series, Volume 3, 1984) uses the English phrase *archive(s) administration* and defines it as “the theoretical and practical study of policies, procedures and problems relating to archival functions.”

actment through the governmental order on archives in 1954.³

Centralization and Sovietization of the archives are instantly obvious, not only from the document itself, but also from the accompanying published interpretation of the order.⁴

In this document the new socialist archival administration pledged to remove "uncontrolled disorder" and "chaotic archival practices of the capitalists" and promised to organize and manage archives in accordance with the "builders of Socialism." It also proclaimed all types of archives to be the sole property of the socialist state.

The new order proclaimed the decentralized and pluralistic nature of Czech archives to be a relic of the bourgeois past that must be eradicated. The model for the archival organization and management would now be the archives of the Soviet Union.⁵ Under the new organizational arrangement the administration of archives was

subordinated to only one governmental department—the Ministry of Interior—which controlled archivists' work, scientific research, and professional and political growth. The newly redefined and consolidated profession's mission was to fulfill the political, scientific, cultural, and economic needs of the state, under the guidance of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPCZ). According to this document, only the "People's Democracy," as the CPCZ defined its rule, would provide the favorable conditions for the consolidation and unification of the Czech archivistics and could offer a qualitative transformation and role for archives in the new society.

Inevitably the post-World War II archival theory and practice of the Czech archival profession was based on a rigid Stalinist model from which, for obvious reasons, it was impossible for archivists to deviate without jeopardizing their position. Ministering to the state ideology and its propaganda was a *conditio sine qua non* for their very existence.

The following decades were characterized by organizational and functional restructuring and consolidating of the Czechoslovak archival system under the "Socialist order." As late as February 1989, in the opening address to the sixth convention of Czech and Slovak historians in Prague, the speaker for the archives characterized the period of the previous decade in the development of Czech archivistics as a period of broadened and improved services of archives in the socialist society. He boasted that Czechoslovak archivistics had fulfilled its mission in the socialist society and was entering a new era marked by a reassessment of the past thirty years of socialist experience.⁶

³The text of the order was published in *Archivní Časopis* 4 (1954): 65-68, and was enacted as a law on 9 June 1954, in the Czechoslovak Law Code. The *Archivní Časopis* [Archival Journal] is the quarterly of the Office for Central Archival Administration of the Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic. The journal is a professional communication medium for the exchange of information in archivistics among Czech and Slovak archivists. It also disseminates various governmental instruction, orders, and decrees related or addressed to the administration and management of archives in Czechoslovakia.

⁴*Ibid.*, 68-72.

⁵The Soviet concept of huge, centralized archives, which perhaps made practical sense in the vast lands of the Soviet Union with relatively few cultural centers, thus justifying the buildup of the "pyramids of knowledge" (in Leningrad or Moscow, for instance), was very much resented in Czechoslovakia, a small country with a dense archival network and an accumulated but diffuse cultural heritage, not so much on political grounds (administrative control of information), as on safety considerations. To accept the concept of huge centralized repositories meant to expose archives to the greater danger of destruction in case of natural calamity. This brings to mind the disastrous fire in the Leningrad Academy Library in February 1988.

⁶See the speech of P. Rafaj, in *Archivní Časopis* 39 (1989): 72. According to Rafaj, the trend was best reflected in the 1986 governmental decree concerning

There is no need to elaborate on the administrative history of Czechoslovakia's archivistics, marked by such "milestones" as the 1954 governmental order (no. 29/1954), the 1974 enactment of the law on archives (no. 97/1974), or the 1986 governmental decree on the development of the archival profession in the Czech Republic (no. 321/1986). During the past forty-year period of unwanted alliance with state ideology and the infamous Czech Ministry of Interior, and in spite of the all-too-familiar linguistic apparatus of political officialdom abundantly applied by archivists, the Czechoslovak archival community accomplished some noteworthy achievements. Despite enormous institutional barriers and an environment where curtailed, censored, and manipulated information was daily bread, the Czechoslovak archivists were able to contribute in the fields of history, diplomacy, codification, genealogy, paleography, heraldics, and in the general theory of archival science, at least on a theoretical level.

Breaking now with its ideological past is for the Czech archivists no less dramatic. Although the tensions within the profession had been mounting under the seemingly calm surface and the discontent with the gloomy state of affairs among archivists was growing a long time before December 1989, it was not until the Prague events erupted that changes really began to accelerate. Archivists found themselves caught in the midst of events beyond their control as shown by the following affairs.

In December 1989, the Prague news media published a story about the destruction of alleged archival documents by personnel from various party, union, military, and police offices; archivists were accused of carrying out these acts of destruction. The news was echoed by Western media (in the

United States by the *New York Times*, *Time*, ABC television news, and others). The ignorance about the archival profession among Prague journalists and the public, coupled with the image of archivists as watchdogs of the state, whose role it was to distort the truth and to hide information from the public, led to the accusation that archivists were the ones who were destroying "archival" records. In the chaotic atmosphere of the December events, no one questioned *what* was being destroyed by *whom*. In fact, none of the documents in question, secret or public, were in the hands of archivists. Technically speaking, they were active, not archival, files in offices and institutions over which archivists exercised no control.⁷ Because the archives were considered by the regime to be an ideological tool for propaganda and because they had indeed played an important role in the bureaucratic political structure of the state, they were compromised and became targets by default. Uninformed journalists and a misguided public did not need precise distinctions as to whom to blame for unauthorized or illegal destruction of records.

Incomplete and sometimes outright false information about the role of the archives was presented to the public by the media, as is illustrated in another incident that occurred in January 1990. Addressing the issue of repatriation of the property of former monasteries in Břevnov and Karlov, which were being used as archival repositories, the Prague newspapers presented the archives to the public as basically police in-

the current state and development of archivistics in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic.

⁷In contrast to the situation in the Soviet Union where, under the pretext of emergency "cleaning" and "making space" for new records, thousands of archival records from the 1930s to the 1950s in the Joint Special Archives of the Military Council and the USSR Supreme court were destroyed in recent years, no such attempt was made in Czechoslovakia. The political changes were too rapid to allow any systematic action. Czechoslovakia did not even experience cases of vandalism in police-held archives as occurred briefly in East Germany.



Figure 3: Protest demonstration by Prague archivists (Photograph from Archiv Hlavního Města Prahy)

stitutions that should be closed down and the buildings returned to their original owners.⁸

In response, Prague archivists took to the streets and staged a protest demonstration against misinformation in the media. They opened an information campaign, including a news conference for journalists, to educate the public about their work. As a result, the media corrected their reports with a series of factual reports about the acute issues confronting the Czech archives.⁹

Czech archivists now realize that they

can no longer hide in their archival shelters, protected by the shell of professionalism alone. For them, the events were a rude awakening from a dogmatic sleep and an instructive lesson in the need for new public relations efforts, which under the past regime were proudly advertised as "excellent." The prolonged though unwanted alliance of the archives with the now-crumbling communist ideology is proving to be a deep misfortune.

In the current state of affairs, the archives of Czechoslovakia are facing a tremendous task in restructuring their institutions vis-à-vis the state and in redefining their mission and their role in society. Czech archivistics is facing an enormous challenge in breaking with its ideological past. A shift from the docile attitudes of the past to outspoken criticism of the old

⁸*Archivní Časopis* 40 (1990): 103, cites the incident as it occurred in the Prague newspaper *Večerní Praha* [Evening Prague], on 22 January 1990.

⁹The demonstration took place on 29 January 1990; the media's subsequent reporting is cited in *Archivní Časopis* 40 (1990): 103.

management and of the Ministry of Interior is evident. The opening words in the first 1990 issue of *Archivní Časopis* reads like an obituary to the old ideology that ruled Czech archivistics for four decades.¹⁰ "What is to be done?" is now the most acute question among the Czech archivists.

After decades of silence, old wounds and painful injustices have surfaced on the pages of *Archivní Časopis*. As Czech archivists come to terms with their past and search their consciences, one can once again read exciting and even heated debate in their journal. "We [archivists] do not want to focus on the last twenty years only," wrote archivist Josef Maršál. "The roots of evil [for Czech archivistics] are not necessarily in the unfortunate year 1968. For those [of us] who remember, [we] know very well what a price the archives had to pay in the 1950s, when the senseless restrictions and purges affected only the noncommunist archivists who had to leave just because their personal background was unacceptable to communists."¹¹

Naturally discussions about the vindication of repressed archivists topped the archival agenda. The first step in the healing process was to reinstate purged colleagues and publicly restore their honor. But this has not been the only cure needed by Czech archivists. The practices of persecution and screening for political reliability ultimately decimated the precommunist professional archival community and administration, causing a decline in prestige and respect for the profession, both at home and abroad. According to Maršál, archives mirrored bureaucratic State power, a result of the "unfortunate conjunction of power" with the "regrettable megalomania" of those who sought their personal glorification. The author urged that "those [archivists] who assisted the Marxist historiography by

deliberate falsification of the history and who in the role of ideological propagandists participated in the creation of tendentious and distorted documentation of history now must search their own hearts."¹²

In order to undo the damage done (often with the active participation of archivists themselves), the archivists are now confronted with the arduous task of redesigning and developing a new concept of their archival mission in a democratic society. They must now reassess the archives' position in the system of a new state administration. The management and organizational structure of the archives and archival profession must also be redefined.

While the necessity for restructuring archival organization and management has quickly become obvious, the proper timing for changes is not as obvious, due to the complex structural reorganization of a new state administration. Yet the voices calling for a break with the Ministry of Interior have been unambiguous.¹³ Separation from the Ministry of Interior is seen as the first step in regaining archival independence. In the recovery of both domestic and international respect Czech archivists seek the assurance of the new government that archives will be managed by professionals without political interference by the state. Concurrently, they have advocated a strong centralized archival management provided with the appropriate legal authority, and providing necessary technological and professional support.¹⁴

For the past twenty years Czech archives were severely affected by neglect and fell far behind in the development of modern

¹²Ibid., 3.

¹³These voices were heard at the Prague meeting of Czech and Moravian archivists, in December 1989, and again in the memorandum of February 1990. Similar voices, proposing a separation of the archives from the Ministry of Interior emerged in 1968 before the Soviet invasion. The hopes of archivists were thwarted after the 1968 invasion, and purges followed.

¹⁴*Archivní Časopis* 40 (1990): 100 ff.

¹⁰Ibid., 1-4.

¹¹Ibid., 2.

archival techniques and methods. Today archivists hope for the return of the "good old structures" and "healthy concepts" in their profession. The focus on professional archival education is seen as the next step in the rectification of past injustices to the profession. The old Scientific Archival Board (Vědecká Archivní Rada, VAR), which served as an advisory body of the Ministry of Interior in the past and which was considered ineffective, passive, and compliant, was dissolved in December 1989, to reemerge in March 1990, staffed by newly appointed officials. The new VAR was expected to revive the professional growth of the archival community by renewing contacts and cooperation with universities and scientific institutions and by removing all policies of the previous establishment which substantially reduced the number of qualified professionals in archives.

The conference of Czech and Moravian archivists in Prague on 20 December 1989 addressed a number of issues including vindications, reinstatements, the professional training of archivists, the dismissal of incompetent officials in archives, necessary legislative changes, and the need for the establishment of a Czech Archival Society (Česká Archivní Společnost, ČAS).¹⁵

Among the noteworthy documents that emerged from the Prague conference in direct connection with the December 1989 events was the memorandum to the Czech government about the position of the archives in the system of the state administration.¹⁶ In this memorandum archivists of the Czech Republic demanded that the control of archival organization and management be transferred from the Ministry of Interior directly to the government. As the best solution the archivists proposed the establishment of an independent archival or-

ganization that would be directly responsible to the government of the Czech Republic (ČSR), thus bypassing the previous subordination to the Ministry of Interior.¹⁷ (See Table 1 for a chart of the proposed independent archival service.)

The memorandum also called for the organizational restructuring of archives as decentralized budgetary units with independent legal status. Anticipating a territorial reorganization of the state, the memorandum urged caution and recommended preserving the current locations of the State Regional Archives by converting them gradually into Historical Archives. There is some fear in the archival community that the physical dislocation of the archives would cause enormous financial constraints and subsequently could cause irreparable material and cultural damage. Archivists have justly argued that the best way to protect archival material in the current state of affairs is to leave the material where it is.

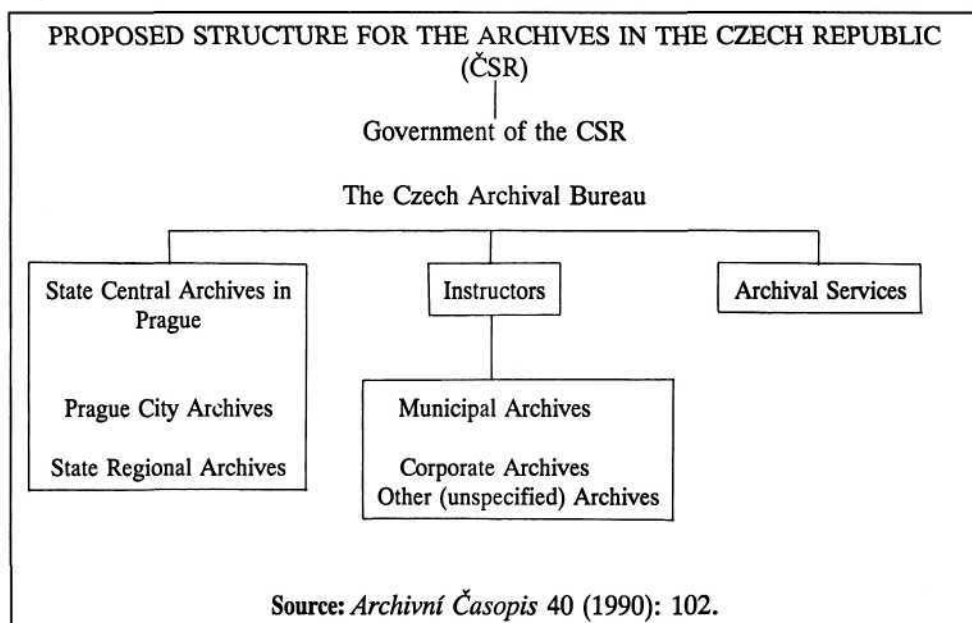
The poor physical state of archival collections, neglected archival buildings, inadequate staffing, an insufficient level of critical thinking, and the dilettante management of archives are all blamed on the legacy of the subordination of archives to the Ministry of Interior. Archivists believe that the proposed structural and statutory changes will bring badly needed reforms in the organization and management of archives and that they will also bring an improvement to the professional performance of archivistics. Now archivists want to move independently. They want an active participation in the process of democratization of the society and participation in the legislative process. As providers of retrospective information in the increasingly complex environment of a global information community, Czech archivists aspire to restore their once highly esteemed professional po-

¹⁵The first constituent session of the ČAS convened in Prague on 4 May 1990.

¹⁶*Archivní Časopis* 40 (1990): 99-102.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 102.

Figure 4



sition and prestige, both in Czech society and in the archival community worldwide.

Developments Since 1989

Since the events described above took place, the debates concerning the future position of archives under the new Czech administration, as well as those concerning the organization and management of the archives, have continued but with no positive results. The archival situation is described as catastrophic and on the edge of collapse.¹⁸

For the first time in decades, a statistical report on the state of archives in the Czech Republic has been published, revealing in full the pitiful status of the much neglected

profession.¹⁹ The authors of the report, Ivan Bittner and Marie Slezáková, estimate that a minimum of \$1,500,000 would be needed just to correct the wrongs of the past. To catch up with the world, they argue, a strong governmental appropriation is crucial. There is no doubt that the harsh laws of the current merciless economic transformation in Czechoslovakia have driven the profession to the wall. Such basic problems as inadequate buildings, shortages in financial resources, and technological backwardness aggravate the situation.

The Third Conference of Archivists of the Czech Republic, held in Prague on 17-19 June 1991, focused on issues involved in restructuring Czech archivistics. Here the principles of the newly proposed archival law, which is expected to be passed by 1993,

¹⁸*Archivní Časopis* 40 (1990): 218. "The collapse of Czech Archives is not just a threatening possibility, it is almost a reality," is a quote from the last paragraph of the letter addressed to the prime minister of the Czech Republic by the participants of the Second Conference of the Czech archivists (9-10 October 1990).

¹⁹Ivan Bittner and Marie Slezáková, "Zpráva o stavu archivu v Čs. republice," *Archivní Časopis* 41 (1991): 27-41.

have been hotly debated. If enacted, the law will have a far-reaching impact on the future direction of the profession.

Noteworthy from the international standpoint is the principle of free and open access to information in archives to conform with the standard practices of other western European countries, which was brought into discussion by archivist Jaroslava Hoffmanová and emphatically endorsed by the conference. The period of restricted access to records would be reduced from fifty to thirty years. Although the debate over the issues of access, protection of privacy, national security, and other related subjects is not over yet, there is no doubt that Czechoslovakia has already stepped in line with the international community by synchronizing its archival practices with the rest of western Europe.

The initial euphoria, brought about by the reemergence of political liberty, has diminished. In its place, the reorganization and restructuring of archives emerged during 1990-91 as the most pressing task. The administration and management of archives were the major items on the June 1991 conference agenda. Basically, three scenarios are possible: (1) archives may stay under

the administrative control of the reformed Ministry of Interior; (2) an independent Czech Archival Bureau may emerge, provided that the separation of archives and the Ministry of Interior is successfully negotiated and financial appropriation for the Archival Bureau is secured from the government (see table 1); or (3) archives may be affiliated with the Ministry of Culture or Education, this being the worst case scenario according to the Czech archivists.

Regrettably, the archivists' struggle to secure their independence and to achieve serious recognition is still hindered by their lack of success in lobbying for the archival cause in government, by lack of support among some governmental bodies, by public indifference, and by lack of communication and contacts, both outside of the archival profession and within the archival community itself.

In spite of the desperate struggle to survive, Czech archival accomplishments in the first year after the collapse of the old regime are already visible. Thus this observer is able to give an optimistic prognosis for Czech archivistics in the near future.