

The Czech Republic's Oldest Museum - so much potential

Greg Hands

I am proud to have been a patron of The Friends for some years now, but it is only thanks to the electors of Chelsea and Fulham that I now have the time to write an article for our award-winning *Newsletter*.

My own connections with the Czech Republic date back to Communist times, when I studied Czech & Slovak for a year at Cambridge and at the Univerzita Karlova (Charles University) and organised a university exchange between the two in the summer of 1989, the first of its kind with an Eastern Block country. I haven't stopped visiting the country since, either as a private citizen, an MP or as a Government Minister.

I have long been interested in going to Opava (Troppau, before 1945) to see the Silesian Museum (*Slezské Zemské Muzeum*). Founded in 1814, this is the Czech Republic's oldest museum, four years older than the National Museum in Prague. It is much celebrated in the historically fascinating Czech Silesia region, which for administrative purposes is folded into Northern Moravia. The region changed hands between Austria and Prussia, and was then divided between Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland in 1919, with the disappearance of the German elements in 1945.

So the museum promised a great deal. However, I should have heeded the warning in the *Rough Guide* to the Czech Republic (2009, and still the best general travel guide to the country). The guide reports "a large but uninspiring exhibition that manages to avoid the most controversial aspects of Silesian history."

This turned out to still be accurate 15 years on, and some 210 years after the museum's foundation. Easily the best aspect of the museum is the building, from 1873 in neo-Renaissance style and purpose-built. It is splendid and bright and perfect for such a museum. As for the exhibits, it would be as if the Velvet Revolution had never happened. Everything is on display, including hundreds of stuffed birds, dozens of stuffed mammals, hundreds of insects, traditional regional costumes, minerals, farm tools, coins and banknotes, clocks, etc. There is no theme, very little sense of chronological development, and there's even a



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Two Controversial Brothers: Uncovering the Hidden History of Opava

Mark Cornwall

In September 2024, as the light was fading, I trudged with my heavy suitcase through the streets of Opava in the Moravian-Silesian region of the Czech Republic. When I reached my hotel I found it in darkness and boarded up; rubbish blocked all the pavements. Opava had suffered badly in the floods which hit the country that month, and all the hotel's databases had been destroyed. Already, in order to reach Opava, I had taken a bus from Ostrava since all rail links were broken.

Despite this rude awakening to a city I had never visited before, I was quickly drawn into Opava's rich and controversial history. Founded officially in 1224, the city has just celebrated its millennium. Its regional significance was boosted after 1742 when Empress Maria Theresa made it the capital of Austrian Silesia, a position it held until the end of the Habsburg Empire. In 1820 it was the site of a major international event, the Congress of Troppau (the German for Opava) where the Russian and Austrian emperors met to discuss how to suppress a revolution in Italy. By this time Opava was expanding as a major cultural and administrative centre. From the pre-modern era its most imposing buildings were ecclesiastical: the Franciscan monastery or the Gothic Cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (redecorated from the 1760s in a heavy Baroque style). In the 19th century the urban space was transformed. Parks now encircled the city centre, and civic and cultural buildings sprang up, most notably a Silesian Theatre (1805) and a Silesian Museum (1814). At the theatre I watched a performance of Karel Čapek's *Věc Makropulos* (*The Makropulos Case*). At the museum - the oldest public museum in the Czech Republic - I found a special exhibition marking the city millennium. This display also highlighted the fact that until 1945 the city of Opava/Troppau had mainly been German.

On visiting the city archive I discovered the forgotten history of two brothers who in the mid-20th century had dominated German Opava's political and cultural life: Reinhart and Werner Kudlich. Their story has been largely erased from Opava's past, just as the city's German inhabitants were expelled *en masse* after the Second World War and replaced with Czechs. The short lives of the

selection of stuffed African mammals: "We have a contract with Ostrava Zoo," I was told. The explanations (in Czech) were as dull as the exhibits, and the English audio-guide was monotonic with a word-by-word translation which might have come from Google, and missed out whole sections as well, which may have been a relief.

The potential of this museum is huge. It was the Kaiser Franz Josef Museum before 1919, when Opava was the regional capital of Austrian Silesia. Opava has given birth to many famous people, from Joy Adamson to the current Miss World, all of whom are conspicuous at having migrated away. But the region is of huge historical importance, as the place where German, Czech and Polish speaking peoples converged. Indeed, the region includes town of Český Těšín, scene of the tragic border war between Czechoslovakia and Poland from 1919, which poisoned relations between two countries who needed to be friends twenty years later.

There is a strong regional pride here. Everything is branded "Silesian", including the town's splendid *fin-de-siècle* theatre. There was even a stamp issued to mark the museum's bicentenary in 2014.

So much more could be done here. The building is in great shape and it's clean and well-staffed with polite and helpful curators and staff. I hope someone might read this article and take this on as a challenge!

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Photographs from left to right, Reinhart Kudlich; his funeral; Werner Kudlich with his daughters

Kudlich brothers very much reflect the nationalist trauma besetting Opava in the 1930s-40s, illuminating the fatal choices which individuals made in that radical era. Their father, Walter Kudlich, had been Opava's last Habsburg-era mayor until 1919 when he was ejected from his position by the new Czechoslovak authorities. This undoubtedly soured the sons' view of the Czechoslovak state.

In June 1938 Reinhart Kudlich (1902-43) would himself become Mayor of Opava, but before that he was already a notable defence lawyer. Soon he gained a reputation as one of the city's best lawyers but controversially he also defended German nationalists. When in 1934 a Czech court convicted one of them as an 'enemy of the state', Kudlich too gained notoriety for his attacks on the authorities. With rising international tensions, it made him a target of the local Czech police. In 1937, the British historian Elizabeth Wiskemann was in Czechoslovakia to research her book *Czechs and Germans* (published 1938). Visiting Opava, she met Kudlich just when he was compiling a dossier on Czech police malpractice; she found him to be 'a reasonably honest and educated man' and a generous informant on local Silesian conditions. When Kudlich was then temporarily arrested, Wiskemann complained to the Czechoslovak foreign ministry that the authorities were denying free speech and creating a 'police state'. Her experience shows how sensitive the Czechoslovak police were about any security threats by this time.

A year later in September 1938 Kudlich had been elected Mayor of Opava and had shifted his allegiance towards welcoming Nazi Germany's takeover of the Sudetenland. Indeed, he personally invited Hitler to annex Opava while at the same time proudly reminding him that this was 'the leading city of Sudeten Silesia'. In these tense days Kudlich did manage to avoid local Czech-German bloodshed before publicly welcoming the Nazi troops as 'liberators'. He then secured extra executive power as mayor, but this was cut short by

June 1940 when he was called up and sent to the Eastern front. In July 1943 his wife received a telegram that he had been killed. For two years thereafter a section of Opava's urban park was named after him.

The papers of Reinhart's younger brother Werner (1903-45) are much more prolific in the Opava archive and he is a much more controversial character. On the one hand, from 1928, he worked methodically at the Silesian Museum, building up its art and archaeological collections. On the other hand, from 1938, he became head of the transformed 'Reich' museum in the city and was soon overseer of all Sudeten museums in Germany. It led to his appointment to a special commission whose task in the East was to confiscate art works from Poland and Ukraine and transport them to the Third Reich. This robbery, and Kudlich's loyal Nazi credentials as a Waffen-SS officer, ensured that he was labelled a war criminal by 1945. He lived long enough (dying in unexplained circumstances in Bavaria in April 1945) to acquire a wholly negative reputation among Czechs. Even so, it can be suggested that he himself played his part in conserving Opava's cultural heritage in today's Silesian Museum. As for Reinhart, his last letters home from the front reveal how he had reassessed his commitment to Nazism and was abandoning its racism. At the end of the war a number of Opava citizens came forward to praise him as a just and humanitarian mayor: someone who, in his loyalty to the city, had at least intervened during the Nazi takeover to prevent the abuse or deportation of Czechs or Jews. The story of these two brothers opens a window on Opava's hidden history: although now a Czech city, its mixed heritage is ever present beneath the surface.

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