

The Czech Republic, Land of Castles and Châteaux

State versus Private Owner

by Milan Svoboda

There are about 2,500 castles and châteaux in the area of 79,000 km² that covers the Czech lands. With some 6,000 towns and villages in the country, almost every second one can boast a historic building. Perhaps this is the reason why castles are often seen as the face of the Czech Republic both at home and abroad. Castles such as Karlštejn, Český Krumlov, Hluboká or Lednice, the splendid documents of Czech history and efforts by Bohemian kings and aristocracy, are today the property of the Czech Republic. The state owns and manages more than a hundred historic aristocratic residencies through the National Heritage Institute, under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture. Further tens of castles and châteaux are in the ownership of the regions, towns and villages, being administered from regional and municipal funds.

However, there are also many Bohemian and Moravian castles, châteaux, monasteries and forts that are currently in the hands of private owners, real persons of flesh and blood, who take care of their running, management and repairs. They include members of important Czech aristocratic families as well as religious orders and congregations that regained their properties

through the restitution process after 1990. The last thirty years have also seen many citizens who, for various reasons, have invested their private funds in historic buildings such as castles, châteaux or forts. Some simply want to preserve the disappearing nature of an ancient monument or start a heritage business, others wish to live in it or make it accessible to the public. Thus in the Czech Republic at the beginning of the 21st century there are two groups of aristocratic residencies – one state-owned, the other in private hands. In terms of heritage protection they are both subject to the letter of the Act on heritage care. From this point of view there shouldn't be any difference between the properties owned by the state and those in private hands – a specialist section of the National Heritage Institute guards the care of both. However, from the point of view of managing, running and funding the properties, the two groups are profoundly different. Management, running and maintenance of the castles and châteaux directly owned by the Czech state and by organisations created by the state for this purpose¹ are massively subsidised from the state's budget. Next to these

¹ For example, the National Heritage Institute (NPÚ) is established by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic and administers more than a hundred heritage sites which include castles, châteaux, monasteries, churches and even a coal mine in Ostrava. Another example can be illustrated by the National Agricultural Museum which looks after the Empire-style Château of Kačina near Kutná Hora, the seat of the aristocratic Chotek family, as well as other historic buildings. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs administers the Château of Štířín, running it as a hotel and conference centre with a golf course in the surrounding English park.

Front cover: privately-owned Blatná Castle, a Gothic-Renaissance moated site with Baroque additions, restyled in 1850–1856 in Neo-Gothic style

Below: state-owned Karlštejn Castle, founded in 1348 by Emperor Charles IV as a repository for the Imperial crown jewels. In 2014 The Friends assisted with the conservation of the original medieval gate



monuments there is another group of castles and châteaux that are managed and financed from the funds of Bohemian and Moravian towns and villages that own them².

In contrast, privately owned castles and châteaux are managed, run and restored mostly from the private funds of the owners. However, just like the state-owned properties, they are entitled to request and receive state funds within the frame of various funding programmes of a number of Czech Ministries such as Ministry of Culture, Finance, Agriculture, Local Development etc. These subsidies tend to be unsystematic, with applications needed to be submitted in the preceding year, and if given, used only during the year applied for. This is difficult for building and restoration projects that, often for technological reasons, may take many years and without a promise of continuous state support. It is a similar situation when it comes to obtaining grants from the EU. It is necessary to mention here that the conditions for being awarded a grant from European Union funds are decided by Ministries of the Czech state, not by the central EU in Brussels. The last programme of grants from EU funds excluded many private owners of historic monuments because the Czech state, as a regulator of conditions for receiving a donation, ruled that the building to be restored needs to have the status of a national cultural monument. In the Czech Republic there are only a few historic buildings with such a high heritage status which are privately owned. Most of the national cultural monuments in the country belong to the state, which is also the regulator of conditions for receiving grants from the EU³. For the next stage of the programme, up to 2027, the same conditions have been set – to be eligible for any funds from the EU, the building

² State-owned heritage monuments are directly connected to state funds via individual ministries and their organisations while the monuments owned by the regions and municipalities are financed from their budgets and from self-governing units. Although it looks as if both the state and the municipality-owned monuments are simply financed from the state budget, the process is governed by many different rules and regulations – e.g. state-owned monuments are subject to the law about the state property and the law about the state budget, which significantly limit the freedom of managing the monument. Thus a state-owned monument, managed by the NPÚ, cannot be sold into private hands unless it is proved that its value is redundant to the state. It is impossible to imagine, for example, that the state would sell Karlštejn Castle. As a symbol of Czech statehood, Karlštejn is indispensable to the state. Contrast this with Slovakia, where a number of state-owned castles and châteaux have been sold off since 1990. Furthermore, it is not possible to let out a state-owned monument or a part of it to a private tenant for more than three years, which makes any substantial private investment most unlikely. Monuments owned by the regions and municipalities are less limited by the legislation.

Privately-owned properties, from the top, Velké Meziříčí, Vysočina, Moravia: the Renaissance-style castle from the 16th century was rebuilt in Baroque style after a fire in 1723.

Castolovice, north-eastern Bohemia: the castle was rebuilt in Renaissance style 1588-1615, acquired its Baroque appearance after 1694.

Stránov, central Bohemia: a Neo-Renaissance rebuilding of a medieval castle



³ By ruling that only 'national cultural monuments' are eligible to receive funds from the EU, the state has secured a virtual monopoly on using European subsidies simply because, in most cases, private owners own only 'cultural monuments'. A national cultural monument is awarded a higher degree of heritage care than a cultural monument, while the status of national cultural monument is given only to the most valuable monuments. And in the Czech Republic most of them belong to the state (eg. almost all of the castles and châteaux owned by the NPÚ have been named national cultural monuments).

must be a national cultural monument or listed by UNESCO.

These were partly the reasons why in 1995 the Association of the Owners of Castles and Châteaux was founded, a free association of some thirty people aiming to connect private owners of historic buildings in Czech lands and to promote their mutual interests. It has to be remembered that in the 1990s an active process of restitution of properties confiscated after 25th February 1948 was taking place, as well as efforts to return castles and châteaux to owners who did not claim German citizenship during the Nazi occupation. Czech society was highly supportive of this policy at the time. The Czech Republic (until 1st January 1993 Czechoslovakia) thus joined other post-communist countries where the new democratic establishment undertook to settle the property wrongs of the communist regime⁴. The founding members of the Association were the restituted from the old Czech aristocratic dynasties (e.g. the châteaux of Blatná, Velké Meziříčí, Boskovice, and Častolovice), as well as the families who during the First Republic already belonged to the important Czechoslovak entrepreneurial elite (e.g. the châteaux of Skalice, Stránov, Lobeč, Houska, and others).

The Association has recently celebrated a quarter of a century of its existence during which many new members have joined. Most are entrepreneurs who have decided to invest their own money into saving and restoring Czech heritage sites. For example, the Château of Hrádek near Sušice, destined for demolition, is today a popular wellness hotel. The Château of Chyš in the region of Karlovy Vary, where Karel Čapek used to work as a tutor, now also offers excellent beer from its own brewery. The Château of Dětenice, for decades a children's home and in disrepair, has become a sought-after tourist resort with a Baroque château, medieval pub and a hotel. In 2019 some 250,000 visitors came to Dětenice. Another example of rehabilitating a degraded historic building is the Rococo Château of Peruc in Northern Bohemia, which the new owner has turned into a picture gallery accessible to the public and a luxury hotel.

⁴ The first law on property restitution dealt with settling property wrongs by the communist regime and granted restitution of properties confiscated between 25th February 1948 and 1st January 1990. Many restitution laws followed, the last one in 2013 on reconciliation with the Church and church organisations, which came into force on 1st January 2013. Although this law was passed by the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Republic on 8th November 2012, President Václav Klaus neither signed nor challenged it.



In 1676 Vilémov was bought by Count Caretto de Millesimo, Marquis of Savona, who changed the building's style from Renaissance to Baroque. The Italian architect Francesco Caratti designed the building's Baroque façade. The Château is privately owned

Only last year six new members joined the Association, adding small but important properties such as Otín near Klatovy, the Château of Kněžice near Sušice, the Château of Palupín near Jindřichův Hradec and the Château of Vilémov near Čáslav. Currently the Association represents more than fifty privately owned castles and châteaux. It is a member of the European Historic Houses Association and Europa Nostra, thus making an important partner to the hundred and more state-owned historic buildings.

It is only right that thirty years after the Velvet Revolution in the Czech Republic two groups of ownership of castles and châteaux, private and state, co-exist. Whether the visitors prefer one or the other is impossible to tell. Perhaps they do not even care. What is important, what we all share and should be proud of, is the same goal of saving and preserving our common European cultural heritage.

Milan Svoboda was a long-term property manager of the privately owned Château of Nelahozeves, which belongs to the Roudnice branch of the Lobkowicz family. He is a former deputy director of the National Heritage Institute, NPÚ, where as a chief property manager in 2009-10, he was in charge of all one hundred state-owned castles and châteaux in the Czech Republic. He is currently a member of the executive committee of the Association of Private Owners, and is a lecturer at Charles University in Prague.



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Images from the top:

Dětenice, an original Gothic fortress was rebuilt as a Renaissance château from 1587, and later changed into the Baroque style.

The Château of Peruc, built 1760-70, is a significant example of the Rococo style in Bohemia.

Kynžvart Château. From 1821 to 1836, the Austrian Chancellor Klemens Wenzel von Metternich remodelled the building in the Empire style with the help of the architect Pietro Nobile

