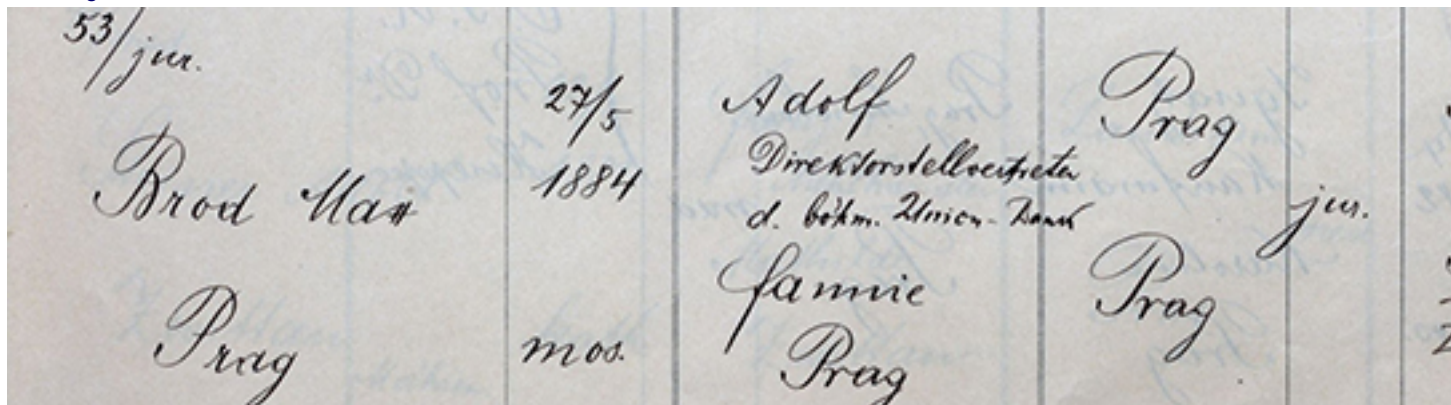

On Novea before the Time of Tycho de Brahe (And Other Things)

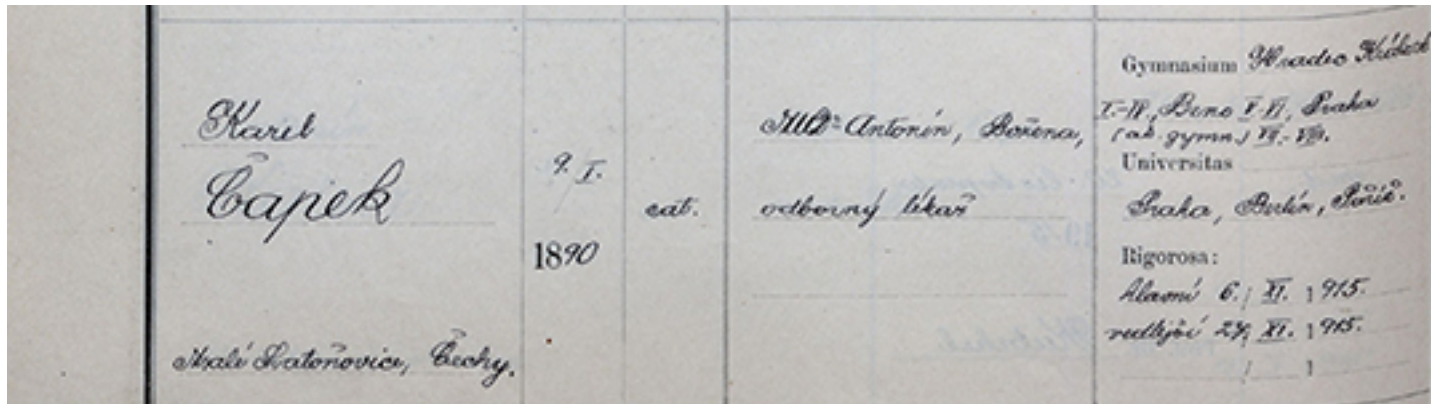
On Novea before the Time of Tycho de Brahe (And Other Things)

“Students of Prague University 1882-1945”, a new digitalisation project, is underway, aimed at digitalising old Charles University documents pertaining to staff and students. Some of this is for the creation of a new app run by the university, enabling users to search for old doctorates.



The project is the work of the Institute of History of Charles University and the Archive of Charles University, in collaboration with the Charles University Computer Centre. Whilst the work has currently focused on registry books of both Czech and German doctoral students of Charles University from 1882 to 1945, Rigorosum protocols, catalogues of students and examination protocols of both the Czech and the (in 1945 abolished) German universities of Prague will be added. In total, information on over 100,000 students will be made available. The project was initiated in the autumn of 2011, and in April 2012 a website, containing a database of these records as developed by the Institute for Computer Science of Charles University, was launched. At this moment however, the app only gives access to documents from the period 1882 to 1945; personal data protection laws curtailing the addition of any post-war documents.

As Petr Cajthaml, the head of this project, and his colleague Jakub Jareš tell me, this project was inspired by similar ones in other universities; and follows other programs run by Charles University to digitise documents from earlier periods. The most important reasons for its conception however was that there was a demand from people to study these documents, and also as they are not in good condition, there is a need to preserve them for posterity, lest some mishap occurs to them. Unlike earlier projects however, this one is done by the university archive, rather than being outsourced to an independent organisation such as Manuscriptorium or Monasterium (apparently this was facilitated by the acquisition of a colour book scanner by the university). As Jareš and Cajthaml note, it's a struggle: so far, 27,000 pages have been digitised, that leaves 1 million to go (however, the project will save them a lot of work after it's finished, as it will mean they will no longer have to prepare copies of these documents anymore if anyone is interested in viewing any of them). For anyone interested in Czech and Slovak history, this database, and the app that stems from it are useful tools indeed. As there were no other universities in the Czech lands (and Slovakia) till the founding of the universities of Bratislava and Brno after Czechoslovakia became independent in 1918, many of the great figures of Czech and Slovak history and arts appear here (Edvard Beneš, Karel Čapek, Milan Rastislav Štefánik, to name a few). Another interesting facet of the database are documents of prominent Czech Germans, such as Franz Kafka, Max Brod, and Gerty Theresa Radnitz.

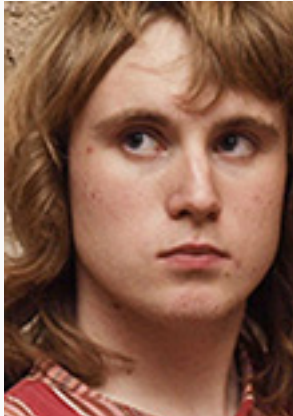


Whilst conducting the interview with Jareš and Cajthaml, I was given access to the storage room where the original documents are contained. A small, climate controlled room in the ceiling of the Carolinum, it features metal cabinets and shelves, littered with old documents. First I'm shown an old registry book; containing names and information of former students. I'm then given a fascinating historical pleasure, as I am shown the actual dissertations of Edvard Beneš, the last president of the First Czechoslovak Republic (and unluckily, the president predating the tragic periods of Czechoslovak history; he was the president preceding the Munich Agreement and then the Communist seizure of power), and Milan Rastislav Štefánik, a Slovakian astronomer turned French army officer and one of the key figures of the creation of Czechoslovakia.

Štefánik's dissertation, entitled "On Novae before the Time of Tycho and on the Novae Casseiopeae" has a simple beauty to it, blue cover with its title written in gold-coloured ink; and its pages covered in hand written passages. Beneš's dissertation, entitled "Origin and Development of Individualism in the History of Modern Philosophy" is sadly less than impressive in view, bound in a rather worn and prosaic brown hard back cover.

The project is ongoing; many documents are yet to be digitized and I'm told that there will be possibly more projects in the future. Nonetheless, there seems to be enough demand in the future to fuel it, and other projects like it.

Profile of the author:



William Francis Hannell is an Erasmus student from Britain (home university: Aberystwyth University), studying History and English Literature at the Faculty of Arts in Charles University. He joined the IForum as he wishes to gain useful experience as he considers journalism to be a possible future career, and also the opportunity to work with fellow students and to partake in a fun, valuable, and productive experience whilst staying here at Charles University. He also wishes to contribute more than just essays to the university, and be a reliable and informative source for all the various goings-on at the institution.

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