



Interwar Entrepreneurs in the Whirl of Economic Booms and Crises

Drahomír Jančík — Barbora Štolleová (Eds.), *Pivo, zbraně i tvarůžky. Podnikatelé meziválečného Československa ve víru konjunktur a krizí*, Prague: Maxdorf 2014, 368 pp.

An interesting publication appeared on the shelves of Czech bookstore at the end of 2014 which brought fresh “wind” in examining the personalities of the Czech/Czechoslovak business. The whole concept works somewhat beyond the hitherto approach to examining the Czechoslovak entrepreneurs. It went well beyond an encyclopedic approach, and the result brings nineteen interesting and often exhaustively processed professional and personal profiles largely based on the study of primary sources, in which the authors alongside the selected personalities also devoted space to economic and often political context.

The reader is at first glance certainly attracted by the luckily chosen name, which combines traditional beer products and weapons, supplemented by Moravian specialties. It is obvious that this represents only selected commodities of the Czechoslovak interwar origin, but these are the ones in which they achieved world application. The subtitle of the book also describes peripety of the interwar economy, which represented a fundamental framework for business. We can positively evaluate the quality of the bookbinding, which with regard to used paper is demonstrated by the weight of this book.

A wide team of authors led by Drahomír Jančík and Barbora Štolleová from the Institute of Economic and Social History at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University participated on the preparation of the book. The editors faced a difficult task to manage a large team of authors counting seventeen persons. This broad team of authors showed in this case a very good solution that contributed to the creation of valuable work. The authoring team gathered on one side Prague’s renowned economic historians connected to the Institute of Economic and Social History and on the other side a number of young researchers, who were given space to present their research. This idea of joining experienced matadors and students or recently graduated students in one team proved to be lucky.

Both editors have seized the study *Entrepreneurship as a challenge*, which provides a profound survey of a robust economic context of the interwar Czechoslovak developments, as well as a brief final summary. It is clear that the fate of any business is unique and unrepeatable, but you can follow some similar features, models and inspire each other. These features became the basis for editors for dividing the book into five sections.

The first section titled *Between tradition and innovation* explores the fate of Czech entrepreneurs who have already built their reputation before the First World War and the interwar period represented to them another challenge, which they coped with in different ways. Ivan Jakubec follows the lives of the pioneers of the car industry Laurin and Klement, whose company after the merger with Škoda Works lost independence. Traditional Bohemian engineering industry — production of agricultural

machinery is now represented by Rudolf Bächer from Roudnice, whose development was elaborated by an experienced duo Jiří Šouša and Jiří Novotný. Well-prepared contribution devoted to František Janeček comes from Daniel Povolný. Although Janeček achieved great successes in arms production, he gradually replaced it by civilian production and left a part of his world-famous brand names in motorcycles JAWA. The following chapter of the first section written by Petr Sedláček refers to the title of the book and its task is to walk “in the footsteps of the Olomouc cheese producers”. Although not everyone likes the “smell” of this business, it is necessary to emphasize that the food industry is another traditional Bohemian industry and even today it is a substantial inspiration. The final chapter of the first section is written by Marcela Efmertová and is devoted to Josef Sousedík, who was an industrialist (electrical engineering), inventor and designer.

The second section named *Facing the phenomenon called Baťa* could evoke a thematic focus on the Baťa family business in Zlín, which broadly became a symbol of the success of the Czech business in the global format. The team of authors, however, chose a different path. They were surely aware that the business activities of Baťa’s family are a widely covered in literature and that the subject has been processed several times. Therefore they decided to target entrepreneurs who were inspired by the business strategy advocated in Zlín and who applied similar management models, trade policy, training and motivation of employees, etc. The first of these entrepreneurs is Friedrich Leopold Popper from Chrudim, a shoe manufacturer known as “Little Baťa” whose business fortunes were followed by Milos Hořejš. Baťa was perceived as a symbol already in the interwar period, and nicknames, which contained the name Baťa were also given to entrepreneurs from other sectors. Jan Böhm, a rose-grower in Blatná, earned the designation “Baťa in roses” and according to his words, he was pleased by this comparison. The next two chapters of the section cover two businesses in apparel, who became “founders” of the Czechoslovak clothing industry, Arnošt Rolný (author Ludmila Cvrčková Porkertová) and Jan Nehera (author Alena Buršíková).

Three posts of the third section *In the gravitational field of arts and culture* pursue entrepreneurial activities in the area where the culture joins the industrial production. Eduard Kubů offered a comprehensive analysis of the development of a furniture company called “Gerstel” based on fragments of information and sources. Drahomír Jančík dedicates his part to another traditional Bohemian industrial production. Glassmaking belonged to a major economic sector. The chapter called *Tough business with clear fragility* maps the fate of the Rückl family business associated with the glassworks in Nižbor. It captures vividly the importance of political contacts and their impact on the business environment. Jiří Šouša’s chapter called *Businessman and the beauty* devoted to Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer and his wife Adele is slightly different from the rest of the book as it watches a senior manager and his wife in connection with the contemporary art scene. However, it is a shining testament of the lifestyle and cultural activities of entrepreneurs.

The penultimate section named *In the snare of the banks and debts* explores in three parts the fate of entrepreneurs who find themselves on the brink of insolvency. While two of them — the manufacturer of building materials Rudolf Bart (author





Tomáš Gecko) and the owner of Choceňská weaving mill Josef Jehnička (author Jiří Novotný) — managed to rescue themselves from the crash, the third — publisher František Borový, unfortunately, did not save his famous publishing house. It is convincingly captured by Barbora Štolleová that František Borový was rather a literary enthusiast, philanthropist and patriot than a businessman. The quality of published edition mattered to him more than commercial success. Such personalities don't usually end up among successful entrepreneurs and are not highlighted as a model to follow. However, they contribute to the development of business and often leave a deeper footprint than their successful contemporaries.

The interwar period is not only associated with entrepreneurial personalities building their businesses, which they founded or took over from their ancestors as the second or third generation. As it is illustrated in the last section of *Modern management*, it is the time of rise of “managers” that often don't have any connection to the family, and executive function is a “normal” job for them. Among the typical representatives of senior industrial management of the First Republic there are the directors of engineering giants ČKD Jiří Hejda (chapter written by Jaroslav Jelínek) and Škoda Works Karel Loevenstein (chapter written by Radek Diestler). Furthermore, we follow in this section the fate of the creator of the Smíchov brewery's business strategy Karel Dimmer Jr., which led to his promotion to the brewing elite (author Martin Minařík); František Malínský, a doctor, manufacturer of sweets and snacks, and creator of the starch concern “Amylon” (author Jiří Novotný) and Prague butcher Emanuel Maceška (author Marcela Starcová). A rich list of sources and literature underlines the quality of the entire publication.

The captured business fates represent a wide range of entrepreneurs, business strategies and philosophies. They clearly demonstrate that there is no correct model that should be followed and became a guarantee of success. Besides even the best business plans, vision and ability to predict market trends, we cannot neglect the influence of “luck” (and its various forms) and often influential supporters and advocates.

Among the nineteen businessmen included in the book, there are either Czech entrepreneurs or representatives of German-Jewish business that gradually inclined to the Czechs. Unfortunately, there is nobody of the German origin. Given the time period and the trend of interwar Czechoslovakia, there is also no entrepreneur from Slovakia or Ruthenia. It would be certainly interesting to show at least in one example how Czechoslovakia created conditions for the establishment of Slovak business class. From a geographic point of view, mostly businessmen from Prague are represented, which is understandable and could be easily justified given the importance of the city as a political and economic metropolis.

There could be a long discussion on choice of businessmen; needless to say, the editors themselves raised these questions. They were probably limited in their selection by available sources and by specialization of the entire team of authors. However, it should be appreciated that there are both famous and less famous businessmen among the “selected”. Especially working on fates of those less known must have been scholarly challenging task, which deserves credit. Vast majority of these businessmen were associated with manufacturing, which might be justified with respect to

the structure of the economy of interwar Czechoslovakia. However, going forward when preparing the next volume, it would be advisable to take into account other economic sectors such as trade and services. In the light of the current economic structure, it could bring inspiration to many.

Release of the reviewed publication was sponsored by the Foundation T-SOFT ETERNITY. It can be stated that foundation headed in the right direction and succeeded not only in contribution to the enrichment of history but also in inspiration for today's business followers. In conclusion, it is necessary to wish that the book found its way to wider audience. Although authors were trying to simplify the style of writing, on some occasions it might be challenging read, that could spur further interest in the study of economic history. Hopefully, the Foundation T-SOFT ETERNITY perceives this book as the first "volume" of systematic record of activities by the Czechoslovak businessmen and finds the means and the willingness to promote further exploration.

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