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Swimming and Bathing in Czechoslovakia until 1938

Abstract

Swimming and bathing in Czechoslovakia started to take shape at the beginning of the 19th century. At first, suitable locations in nature were used, with the first swimming baths built later on, primarily on rivers. The first competitive swimming races were held in 1845 on the Vltava River and in 1890, the AC Prague Sports Club founded a swimming department which also included competitive swimming races. In 1914, the Czech Union of Swimming was founded and in 1919 it was renamed as the Czechoslovak Amateur Swimming Association. The number of swimming pools at this time was very low, the conditions of Czechoslovak swimmers were not ideal, and their results at international swimming competitions suffered as a result.

Keywords: swimming and bathing, swimming pools and swimming baths, the Czechoslovak Amateur Swimming Association, Czechoslovak swimmers

The Development of Swimming and Bathing in Czechoslovakia until 1918

Swimming and bathing in Czechoslovakia started to take shape at the beginning of the 19th century. At first, suitable locations in the nature were used, with the first special swimming baths built later on, primarily on rivers. At the time, the oldest swimming bath in all of former Austria, and the first of its kind in Central Europe, was a military swimming bath constructed in 1809 by the Vltava river bank. It was founded by a soldier named Ernest von Pfuel, former master swimmer on the Vltava River. This swimming bath was used primarily for swimming instruction for members of the Prague garrison, but was also open to the public every Sunday¹. The military swimming bath was completely devastat-

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¹ J. Štumbauer, T. Tlustý, R. Malátová, *Vybrané kapitoly z historie tělesné výchovy, sportu a turistiky v českých zemích do roku 1918*, České Budějovice 2015, p. 117.

ed by floods in 1824, but was later rebuilt to meet higher standards. In 1840, the Civil Swimming Bath was opened in the vicinity of the military bath, boasting a big restaurant and view of the river. The bath was predominantly frequented by men and children, as for women to bathe in public was considered to be against “good manners”. The brave women who did come out to bathe wore such swimming costumes that they almost drowned in them. The first bathing booths (at that time, bathing in the open air was not allowed on the count of “good manners”) appeared at the beginning of the 19th century in Žofín, where the famous river baths were later established in 1884. Various natural swimming pools and river baths were gradually established in other towns across Bohemia and Moravia².

In 1845, upon the arrival of the first steam train from Olomouc to Prague, the first swimming races were held on the Vltava River. In 1890, the Athletic Club Prague Sports Club established a swimming department, which also conducted competitive swimming races. Before World War I, the clubs AC Sparta (Athletic Club Sparta) and Sports Club Podolí (SK Podolí) were formed. In 1914, the Czech Amateur Athletic Union (CAAU) established a swimming division, with the participation of the clubs Athletic Club Prague, Athletic Club Sparta and Moravská Slavia. Later, SK Podolí (Sports Club Podolí), ABC Braník (Athletic Braník Club), ČVK Brno (Czech Rowing Club Brno) and Sports Club Slavia (SK Slavia) also joined³.

Immediately following the end of World War I, athletic and competitive swimming continued to develop. The first athletic swimming clubs, ČPK (Czech Swimming Club), Prague APK (Amateur Swimming Club) and the leading division ŽSK (Jewish Sports Club) Hagibor Prague were formed. Swimming clubs were also established in other towns such as Plzeň, Pardubice, Tábor, Liberec, Ostrava, Brno, Příbram, Bratislava and Košice⁴.

Czechoslovak Amateur Swimming Association (CSASA)

The headquarters of athletic swimming came into being as one of the last athletic headquarters in Czechoslovakia – quite late considering the swimming tradition spanning over one hundred and fifty years. In 1911, an association of swimming clubs for Bohemia and Moravia was established in Prague, which was the precursor to the founding of the swimming association. In 1914, on the eve of the First World War, the Czech Union of Swimming, by the initiative of certain functionaries (e.g. Vilém Makovička) of the club of AC Prague, was approved by the decree of the Mayorality in Prague on 24th May 1914, signed 8 A 2164 No. 200599.

² J. Hrubeš, E. Hrubešová, *Pražské domy vyprávějí II*, Roztoky u Prahy 1997, pp. 78–80.

³ J. Štumbauer, *Vybrané kapitoly z historie tělesné výchovy, sportu a turistiky v meziválečném Československu*, České Budějovice 2016, p. 143.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

During the First World War swimming, along with all other sports, stagnated and therefore the newly formed union was highly unproductive. It was not until peace was restored that sports and athletic institutions were finally revived, having adapted to the new state of affairs. Furthermore, the General Assembly of the Czech Swimming Association decided to change their name to the Czechoslovak Amateur Swimming Association (CSASA) on the 19th January 1919 at 9 am at the Opera Café, presiding over the entire territory of Czechoslovakia and the affiliated nine clubs. Hungarian and Jewish swimming clubs joined the association in 1922. *Sportovní revue* became the official magazine of the CSASA.⁵ The association became a member of the International Swimming Federation FINA at a 1920 congress held in Antwerp.

In 1922 the CSASA consisted of five administratively autonomous units called **divisions: the Prague division** (the affiliated clubs of APK, ČPK, SK Slavia, AC Sparta, SK Mělník, SK Podolí ČSK Vyšehrad, SK Smíchov, AC Praha 1890, ŽSK Hagibor, APC Braník, Union Žižkov, ČAC Roudnice, Meter Vinohrady and SK Pardubice⁶) based in Prague, **the Pilsen division** (the affiliated clubs of VPK Radbuza (Rowing Club) Plzeň, SK České Budějovice, ČPK Plzeň, APK Plzeň (Association of professional clubs), SK Písek, Horymír Příbram, VK Jordán (Rowing Club)⁷) based in Pilsen, **the Brno division** (the affiliated clubs of ČVK Brno, the swimming club “Bar Kochba” in Brno, Makabi Brno, SK Beskyd Orlové, SK Slezská Sparta Orlové, ŽSK Makabi Moravská Ostrava, SK Slovácká Slavia Uherské Hradiště, VK Kyjov⁸) in Brno, **the Bratislava division** (the affiliated clubs of Polgári athletic club in Bratislava, Polgári Torna Egystületin Bratislava⁹) based in Bratislava and **the Kosice division** (the affiliated clubs of Kassai athletic club, SE Törekves, ŠK Slavia (Sports Club), SC Hakoah, SK Košice, Presovi Tornaés Vivo Egyletin Prešov¹⁰) based in Kosice, and also served to unite all of the clubs in Czechoslovakia – Czech, Slovak, Hungarian and Jewish. New divisions were constantly being formed, dissolved, or their names were changed. In 1938, there were six divisions: the Central Bohemian division, the Moravian-Silesian division, the Central Slovak division, the East Slovak division, the West Slovak division and the Hungarian division. Before the occupation, there were 61 clubs altogether in the CSASA, 21 in Bohemia, 11 in Moravia, 28 in Slovakia and 1 in Carpathian Ruthenia. The Association of German Swimming Societies in Czechoslovakia formed a special

⁵ National Archives in Prague, Fund ČsAPS, box 1., book1. Č.V. Aa93, general assembly ČsAPS 11. 1. 1920.

⁶ National Archives in Prague, Fund ČsAPS, box 1., book 2. Č.V. Aa92, general assembly ČsAPS, 22. 4. 1922.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

organizational unit and was based in Teplice (Verband der Deutschen Schwimmvereine in Böhmen, Mähren und Schleisen) which joined the CSASA in 1925 and was also governed by the regulations set by the CSASA¹¹.

Swimming Pools and Baths in Inter-war Czechoslovakia

The beginnings of the CSASA were quite difficult. The association had a hard time securing sufficient funding for international cooperation and placing their swimmers in international competitions. Czechoslovak swimmers had quite average results when compared to their international competitors, in large part due to the poor state of our country's swimming pools at the time.

The swimming races and competitions took place mainly on rivers. The first male and female Czechoslovak championship took place on the Vltava River near Císařská louka in Prague 1919. In the 20th century, long-distance races became very popular. The most famous one was across Prague (sometimes also across the Vltava River) and it first took place in 1906 and took place again more than thirty times. An indoor spa with a swimming pool measuring 20×10 m was built in Liberec around 1900 and in 1909, the Teplice Savings Bank built a winter spa in Teplice with a swimming pool measuring 20×12 m, which was filled with hot spring water¹². On December 1st 1923, the Klárov swimming pool was opened in Prague, and although it did not have the proper dimensions, it played a very important role for the state of swimming in the country, as it allowed swimmers to train even in the winter¹³. It took long after the end of World War I for swimmers in Prague to have a 25-meter long swimming pool. The first regulation¹⁴ indoor 25-meter long swimming pool did not appear in the Czech lands¹⁵ until 1927, when it was opened in Prague on Klimentská Street. More 25-meter-swimming pools began to crop up in the YMCA Palace in Prague in 1928¹⁶, the "Schicht Pool" in Ústí nad Labem in 1931, the swimming pool in Plzeň in 1932 and the pool in the AXA Hotel in Prague. In 1932, an indoor pool was opened in Hradec Králové, though its di-

¹¹ S. Krajíček, *Po stopách vývoje plaveckého sportu*, Česká Lípa 1947, p. 81 and 82.

¹² "Českosl. plavectví" 1925, nr. 19, p. 2.

¹³ "Českosl. plavectví" 1923, nr. 5, p. 3.

¹⁴ Non-regulation (shorter than 25m) pools were usually located in city baths and served mainly for bath and spa purposes. E.g. in Charlottiny lázně Na Ponávce (today called Vlhká street) in Brno built in 1885 with a 20×8m swimming pool for summer and winter use. Also a 20-meter pool in Liberec built in 1902, in Ústí nad Labem built in 1908 or the indoor pool in the Koruna baths on Wenceslas Square built in 1914, which had a hexagon shape. In 1926, a 20 m athletic swimming pool was built in the Tyršově House.

¹⁵ The very first indoor heated pool was the Grössling pool built in 1895 in Czechoslovakia.

¹⁶ T. Tlustý, *Tělesná výchova s port v pražském sdružení YMCA v meziválečném období*, "Česká Kinantropologie" 2016, nr. 20(2), p. 42–57.

mensions were 30×12 m. Even as late as 1938, there were only 8 indoor pools in the country, which explained the sporadic successes of our swimmers in European Championships and their poor results at the Olympic Games. In 1930, the swimming stadium in Prague's Barrandov district was opened¹⁷.

During the inter-war period, many natural, popular and often frequented swimming pools and river springs were established in Czechoslovakia. Among the most famous was the aforementioned swimming complex in Barrandov, Prague, opened in August 1930. There were also many riverside swimming pools in Prague, such as Žluté lázně in Prague's Podolí which was opened in 1910, the Na Mlýnka Spa, the Ponton Spa in Žofín and the Civic Swimming Pool in Klárov. A large number of natural swimming pools were also open to the public in the vicinity of Prague and other towns in Bohemia and Moravia.



Image 1. The Slovanka swimming pool on the Vltava river

¹⁷ J. Štumbauer, *Vybrané kapitoly...*, pp. 143–150.

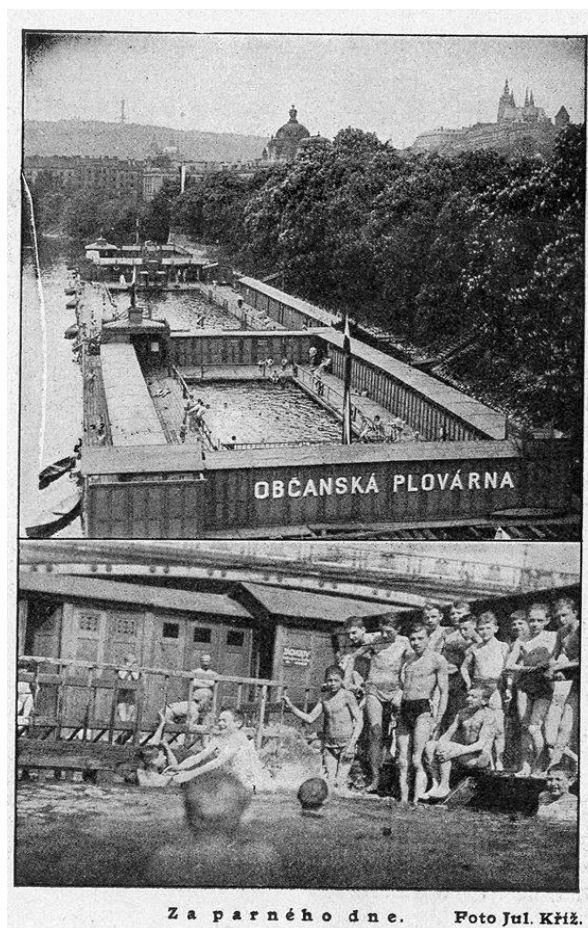


Image 2. Civic swimming pool in Klárov in 1917

Barrandov Swimming Stadium

On the 15th October 1929, a special CSASA congress was held in Prague to discuss the problematic state of athletic swimming in Czechoslovakia as well as the country's lack of a swimming stadium.

In December 1929, the construction of the Barrandov stadium was commenced¹⁸.

On August 15th, 1930, the first regulation fifty-meter pool was opened in Barrandov for the Republic Championship in swimming¹⁹.

¹⁸ "Českosl. plavectví" 1929, nr. 11–12, p. 7.

¹⁹ "Českosl. plavectví" 1930, nr. 9–10, p. 1.

The swimming pool was built for the Czech Swimming Club and was the only swimming stadium in Czechoslovakia with a 50×18 m swimming pool, a depth of 1 m to 4.7 m in the diving area, six racing lanes and a diving tower with platforms at 5 and 10 m. In addition to the main pool, there was a paddling pool, grassy areas, changing rooms, tennis courts, boathouse, sandy beach with a swimming pool, clubhouse, basketball and a volleyball court. The tribunes were also able to accommodate up to 4 000 spectators²⁰.

It was a unique, modern structure, built into the Barrandov Cliffs, in a former limestone quarry, lending it its special romantic charm.

The basin meets all international swimming regulations down to the very last detail... its design meets the highest modern standards... the diving tower, built from reinforced concrete, is the only one in the country that meets all prescribed regulations. The basin is filled from the water well on the Vltava River, with water filtered in an ecological manner making it perfectly clean and safe ... The sun shines from the East until 5 o'clock in the afternoon ... In cold temperatures, the water is generally 2 degrees warmer than the air ... and its shielded and wind-protected position makes it suitable for bathing even on less favourable days²¹.

However, from today's point of view, the Barrandov pool was more of a concrete water reservoir built in an unsuitable location with water that was neither heated, cleaned nor chlorinated, and was even colder than in the Vltava River – something which did not matter to the swimmers and divers back then, as they were accustomed to the natural water in rivers and ponds²².

The owner of the swimming stadium, the Czech Swimming Club, faced considerable financial hardship after construction was completed, as the 900 000 crown (26 666 dollars) budget was exceeded by more than 250 000 crowns (7407 dollars). Despite the considerable debt, the stadium was run successfully, and any difficulties went unnoticed by the pool's visitors. Unfortunately, it is not evident from the archival documents how the Czech Swimming Club's debt was finally resolved²³.

In the 1950s, part of the Barrandov Cliffs broke off and the pool was damaged. It has never been fully restored to its original condition, nor could it compete with the new swimming stadium in Podolí. Thus, in 1965, the glory days of the oldest swimming pool in Czechoslovakia ended²⁴.

²⁰ P. Ryska, *Praha neznámá*, Prague 2016, p. 27.

²¹ National Archives in Prague, Fund PSTV, k. 5. *Informace o plaveckém bassinu pod Barrandovem* (without date) in M. Waic, *Tělesná výchova a sport v politickém životě meziválečného Československa*, Prague 2016, p. 163.

²² P. Ryska, *Praha neznámá*, p. 29.

²³ M. Waic, *Tělesná výchova a sport...*, p. 164.

²⁴ P. Ryska, *Praha neznámá*, p. 29.

The Bratislava Grössling

In the 19th century, not everyone could afford to have a bathtub at home. Furthermore, the municipal waterworks in Bratislava only began supplying households potable and household water in 1886. This is why baths with a swimming pool and sauna were established for the citizens of Bratislava. The grounds where the swimming pool was erected formerly housed the gardens and parks of Grössling, originating in the 18th century. The swimming pool is named after this very landmark²⁵.

The swimming pool consisted of three parts: the oldest one, constructed in 1895, contained bathtubs. Later, in 1913, another addition to the building was created, housing a large and small swimming pools. A sauna was also included. The third section, which was the latest addition to be built in 1923 in functionalist style, was based on the projects of the renowned architects of the inter-war period – Bedrich Veinwurm and Ignac Veczeia, and served as a changing room²⁶.



Image 3. The Grössling Swimming Pool in Slovakia

Swimming in Slovakia

Swimming began to gain in popularity in Slovakia in the second half of the 19th century, increasing after the 1st modern Olympics in Athens in 1896.

²⁵ <http://www.pluska.sk/regiony/bratislava/na-plavarni-grossling-toto-je-zname-miesto-ocami-fotografov.html> [date 12.06.2017].

²⁶ <http://bratislava.dnes24.sk/prachom-zapadnuta-krasa-kupelov-grossling-uvidejte-ju-este-niekedy-246176> [date 12.06.2017].

In Bratislava, the first indoor swimming pool, Grössling, was built in 1895. Until Czechoslovakia was founded in 1918, swimming in Slovakia had only been cultivated in certain towns such as Bratislava and Košice, which was also where the first swimming clubs were founded.

The first competitive swimmer of Slovak origin was Zoltán Halmay, a native of Vysoká nad Moravou. He successfully represented Hungary at three Olympic Games (1900, 1904, 1908) and won a total 2 gold, 4 silver and 1 bronze medal.

The first records of competitive swimming in Slovakia are from 1921, when promotional swimming competitions took place between Devín and Bratislava. These competitions were organized by the Hungarian club – PAC (Pozsonyi Athletic Club).

In 1923, the Slovak Swimming Union was established and later that year joined the CSASA.

In 1928, the LIDO summer swimming pool in Petržalka was built, serving as training grounds for all of Bratislava's swimmers.

The state of competitive swimming in Slovakia was, to a certain extent, determined by the number of indoor pools and the quality of professional coaches. The number of clubs was gradually growing: TPK-Trnava Swimming Club, PPK-Piešťany Swimming Club, Swimming Club in Banská Bystrica, Trenčianske Teplice, Banská Stiavnica, Trenčín and Prešov.

The best swimmers in Slovakia were all from Bratislava. Generally speaking, however, Slovak swimmers lagged behind the Czech swimmers, especially those from Prague.

During the WWII, the two swimming associations separated and became independent, seeing a significant decline in the results of the swimmers²⁷.

Czechoslovaks on the International Scene (Olympic Games, European Championships)

As has already been mentioned, Czechoslovak swimmers were presented with less than ideal conditions during the inter-war period, which was in turn reflected in their poor results at international competitions.

Our best swimmer in the mid-1900s was Rudolf Piowaty from the Bar Kochba swimming club in Brno. He held several World Championship records in freestyle and backstroke events. He took part in the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris, where he reached the semi-finals in the 100 m breaststroke and in the relay (consisting of Václav Antoš, Stanislav Bičák, Viktor Legát, Rudolf Piowaty) 4 × 200 m freestyle heat. Jarmila Müllerová had a very successful run at the same Olympic Games, reaching 5th place in the 100 m backstroke. Another Czech swimmer, Eva Chaloupková, competed in the 400 m freestyle race, though she

²⁷ <http://www.bajos.estranky.sk/clanky/plavanie-na-uzemi-slovenska.html> [date 18.06.2017].

finished last. Swimmers Viktor Legat, Stanislav Bičák and Julius Balasz were eliminated in the 100 m freestyle heat.

In **1926**, the **1st** European Championship was held in Budapest, where Julius Balasz won the bronze medal in diving. Our relay team finished fourth, in the 4×200 m freestyle race. Swimmers Antoš and Koutek made it to the 400 m freestyle finals. Balasz and Antoš represented Czechoslovakia at the 1928 Olympic Games in the Netherlands, though their performances were not noteworthy. The **2nd** European Championship in Bologna, Italy in **1927** was a great success for Václav Antoš, who finished third in the 400m freestyle race and fifth in the 1500 m freestyle race. Antoš beat the official Czech record and was thus awarded a “Laurel Leaf”. The **3rd** European Championship was held in Paris in 1931. Bratislava swimmer Pavel Steiner boasted excellent results, finishing third in the 100m freestyle race. František Getreuer came in fourth in the 400m freestyle race. In 1932, Pavel Steiner won the Grand Prix in Paris for his performance in the 100m freestyle race. Our swimmers did not participate in the X. Olympic Games in Los Angeles 1932 due to lack of funds. At the **4th** European Championship in Germany in **1934**, Teplice native Leikert came in second in platform diving and third in springboard diving. He also came in 9th in spring board diving and 16th in platform diving at the Olympic Games in 1936. Czechoslovak swimmer Schramková came in 5th in the 100 m freestyle race. The 11th Olympic Games were held in Berlin in 1936. Our swimmers Eliška Boubelová, Irma Schramková and Felix Erbert did not make it past the heats of their respective events. The **5th** European Championship took place in London in **1938**, though Czechoslovak swimmers were unsuccessful. The Olympic Games did not take place in the years 1940 and 1944 due to the wars²⁸.

Conclusion

As has already been mentioned, Czechoslovak swimmers did not have ideal conditions in the inter-war period. There was a lack of swimming pools and funding to the detriment of Czechoslovak swimmers, whose performances at international competitions such as the Olympic Games, the European Championships and other international races and competitions suffered as a result.

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²⁸ J. Štumbauer, *Vybrané kapitoly...*, p. 150–151.

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Pływanie i kąpiele w Czechosłowacji do roku 1938

Streszczenie

Pływanie i kąpiele w Czechach i Słowacji zaczęły się formować u progu XIX wieku. Początkowo korzystano z odpowiednich warunków naturalnych, stąd pierwsze kąpieliska budowano przede wszystkim w korytach rzek. Pierwsze zawody pływackie zorganizowano w 1845 roku na Wełtawie, a w 1890 roku założono w AC Prague Sports Club sekcję pływacką, która obejmowała również pływanie wyczynowe. W 1914 roku założono Czeski Związek Pływacki, a w 1919 zmieniono jego nazwę na Czechosłowackie Towarzystwo Amatorów Pływania. Liczba basenów pływackich była w tamtych czasach niewielka, warunki stworzone czechosłowackim pływakom nie były idealne, a to sprawiło, że ich wyniki w międzynarodowych zawodach pływackich nie były imponujące.

Słowa kluczowe: pływanie i kąpiele, pływalnie i kąpieliska, Czechosłowackie Towarzystwo Amatorów Pływania, czechosłowaccy pływacy.