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R O Z P R A W Y

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Irrespective of the fact that there lived very affluent and influential nobility in the Crown Lands of Bohemia even in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the majority of the Czech nation was in fact plebeian. Unlike the Poles and the Hungarians, the Czechs could not boast a truly numerous noble elite, and this fact had some fascinating consequences. It was the nobility from the period prior to the battle at White Mountain (Bílá hora), allegedly considered purely Czech from the ethnic and language point of view that was gradually becoming more glorified than the cosmopolitan Austrian aristocracy. It was, however, the rejection of nobility as such, a phenomenon that emerged significantly for the first time in 1848 that proved to have much greater meaning. Here we need to point out that this was not a purely Czech phenomenon but rather a phenomenon that was closely linked to democratization and liberalization trends in the then society. In Austria or Austro–Hungarian Empire this trend could be attributed to other causes than just the national fragmentation of the monarchy. Throughout the ages, the nobility had become a special caste significantly differing from the rest of the population. It had a number of privileges, some of which managed to outlive 1848. One of such privileges was the right to bear coats of arms. Since 1820, armorial certificates were no longer issued for burghers and, from then on, the right to bear arms was reserved only to nobility. Heraldry, which had been a thriving science for ages, being of utmost importance in people's daily lives, became, literally overnight, a field of study reserved to a handful of the privileged few. Those who failed to comply with the new regulations faced severe punishment. A person could face a fine or imprisonment not only for illegitimately bearing a noble title but also for using a personal coat of arms. As a consequence, these exclusively aristocratic symbols, from then on, slowly became an object of envy, disgrace or even hatred among people, the majority of whom could not possibly even dream of similar privileges¹. In the

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¹ Despite that, people were still keen to obtain non-noble coat of arms. This is evident from the fact that since the second half of 19th century, the so-called *Wappenfabrik* affairs were becoming more and more common. These forgeries of the heraldic-genealogical institutes were most common in early 20th century when some of the institute heads were prosecuted for their illegal activities.

monarchy, the acquisition of coat of arms was linked to ennoblement even though there were some exceptions to the rule².

In the Austro–Hungarian Empire³, there were several ways how to acquire a hereditary title⁴. In this paper, we shall not elaborate on them in greater detail⁵; we will merely point out that a minority of people were ennobled by the emperor's supreme decision whereas the majority was ennobled using „systematized nobility” (in German *systematisierter Adel* and *systemmäßiger Adel*)⁶. *Systemmäßiger Adelstand* is used to denote the claim of commissioned officers to ordinary nobility after having served in the army for 30 years; the claim was provided for in the decree of Maria Theresa dated 12 January 1757, which was consequently amended several times. Pursuant to the Imperial Decree dated 3 December 1810 and published on 16 April 1811, the 30 year period included also the period during which the applicant served in the imperial army as a private or a NCO; nevertheless, the Imperial Order dated 2 January 1841 stipulated, from then onward, the precondition of an uninterrupted service. Under this provision, the period needed for the ennoblement of a commissioned officer who left the army and then came back later started as of the date he returned. Participation in a military campaign was yet another precondition, applicable since the very beginning therefore the privilege applied only to members of combat units. However, as the Austro–Hungarian Empire had not been involved in any war since 1866⁷, the provision was, upon requests by top military tiers, amended by a supreme ruling dated 30 April 1896, and from then on a period of 40–year service without criminal record was sufficient for the ennoblement of commissioned officers.

On the contrary, *Systematisierter Adelstand* refers to a hereditary titles acquired on the basis of one of the „privileged” monarchic orders⁸, which included the Order of Saint Stephan, the Order of Leopold and the Order of the Iron Crown. Until 1884, when this

² When ennobled through a supreme imperial ruling, a person did not need to have a certificate and could become a nobleman without having any coat of arms. A. Cornaro, *Nobilitierungen ohne Diplom und Ausfertigungsgebühr*, „Scrinium. Zeitschrift des Verbandes österreichischen Archivare”, Heft 43, Wien 1990, p. 126–139.

³ After the creation of Austro–Hungarian Empire in 1867, the Hungarian kingdom had its own nobility social ranks and legislation, which partly differed from the Austrian one; there was e. g. no knightly title there. Moreover, in Austria there was no nobility law as such. Instead, there was an array of acts, decrees and supreme decisions, recognized as general directives. Nevertheless, titles awarded by Austrian or Hungarian rulers were valid in the other part of the monarchy and did not require any special recognition. Basically, during re–ennoblements an Austrian citizen could only be granted an Austrian noble title while a Hungarian citizen only a Hungarian noble title.

⁴ S. G ó r z y ń s k i, *Nobilitacje w Galicji 1772–1918*, Warszawa 1999, s. 11–37.

⁵ See e. g. R. Granichstaedten–Czerva, *Altösterreichisches Adels- und Wappenrecht*, „Adler. Zeitschrift für Genealogie und Heraldik”, Bd. 1 (XV.), 1947, p. 49–58.

⁶ J. Županič, *Nová šlechta Rakouského císařství [The New Nobility of the Austrian Empire]*, Praha 2006, s. 119–133.

⁷ Suppressing the insurgency in Dalmatia in 1869, occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878 and suppressing riots in Bosnia, Herzegovina and south Dalmatia in 1882 were however all considered military campaigns.

⁸ B. Waldstein–Wartenberg, *Österreichisches Adelsrecht 1804–1918*, „Mitteilungen des österreichischen Staatsarchivs”, Bd. 17/18, 1964/1965, Wien 1965, p. 127–128; V. M ě ř i č k a, *Řád Marie–Terezie [Order of Maria Theresa]*, special issue of magazine „Heraldika a genealogie” [„Heraldry and Genealogy”], Prague 1990, p. 39 an.

provision was repealed, each of the above orders was subdivided into three grades — Knights Grand Cross, Knights Commanders and Knights (called the Knights of the small cross in case of St. Stephan), or the first, second and third class Knights (in case of the Order of the Iron Crown). In terms of distinction, the Order of St. Stephan was at the top of the hierarchy. It was mainly designated for nobility coming from all the Crown Lands, although in order to receive, one did not need to be a nobleman. Person conferred any of the three grades of an order was entitled to apply for baronage and, similarly, barons could apply to become counts⁹. As for the other two orders, Knights Grand Cross of the Order of Leopold or First Class Knights of the Order of the Iron Crown automatically received the title of a Secret Councillor, the highest award in the Austro–Hungarian Empire that gave the holder the right to enter the court and to enjoy the title Excellency. Nevertheless, this grade was designated for the chosen few, especially for the hereditary nobility of great antiquity. Until the 1880s, we can find only very few burghers and newly ennobled persons in this group — mostly ministers, top clergymen and generals¹⁰. The other two classes of both orders allowed the awarded person to apply for the title of baron (Knight Commander of the Order of Leopold and Second Class Knight of the Order of the Iron Crown) or a knight (Knight of the Order of Leopold and Third Class Knight of the Order of the Iron Crown)¹¹. Unlike the title of a Secret Councillor, one was not granted a noble title by merely holding one of these orders, not even in case of the Order of St. Stephan, and had to apply for it separately. The titles were bestowed upon commissioned officers and/or civilians and, consequently, the *systematisierter Adelstand* was to a certain degree crucial for the ennoblement of the top tiers of civil society. As of mid–19th century the monarchic orders were conferred on a truly mass scale. It was especially, the frequent bestowal of the Order of the Iron Crown that led to a great increase in the number of ennobled persons. According to the ennoblement figures from 1848–1898, as many as 65% of barons and 94% of knights received their titles on the basis of one of the monarchic orders¹². Despite the fact that the title did not automatically imply a membership in the exclusive aristocratic club but instead was merely an entrance ticket to this highly hierarchical society, the majority of the population saw little difference between a newly ennobled baron and a member of a noble family of great antiquity. In 1884, when the Emperor Franz Joseph revoked the provisions enabling ennoblement in the statutes of orders of St. Stephan, Leopold and the Iron Crown, the problem with *systematisierter Adelstand* was at least partly resolved¹³.

The military order of Maria Theresa, however, was of a different nature. It was awarded solely to commissioned officers for valour in combat; the holders of this order were automatically ennobled, immediately after being promoted. The holders of an order

⁹ Chapter 17 of the statutes of the Order.

¹⁰ Alexander Bach was, for instance, awarded the Knight Grand Cross of the Order of Leopold only upon leaving his post of the minister of interior in 1859.

¹¹ S. 23 of the statutes of the Order of Leopold and S. XXI of the Order of the Iron Crown.

¹² J. B. W i t t i n g, *Statistik der Standeserhöhungen während der Regierung Seiner Majestät des Kaisers Franz Josef I.*, [in:] *Festschrift zum fünfzigjährigen Regierungs-Jubiläum (1848–1898) Seiner kaiserlichen und königlichen apostolischen Majestät Franz Josef I.*, hrsg. von Historischen Vereinen Wiens im Selbstverlage des Vereines für Landeskunde von Niederösterreich, Wien 1898, p. 59–91.

¹³ Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Kabinettsarchiv, HHStA, Separatakten, B 32 s/1883; ibidem, Kabinettskanzlei (Vorträge), 2597/1884.

were traditionally entitled to knighthood but since the Hungarian nobilitation law did not provide for matters concerning knighthood, the relevant section of the law was revised, upon the Hungarian cabinet's request. The highest ruling dated 21 August 1894 and the supreme decree dated 8 March 1895 stipulated that holding an order automatically implied solely ordinary nobility. Upon request, holders of all grades of the Order of Maria Theresa were conferred baronage. The 1884 revocation of nobilitation provisions did not apply to the Order of Maria Theresa.

The members of the Czech national elite, which included few professional soldiers, could be ennobled only on the basis of a supreme ruling or, prior to 1884, upon bestowal of an order. In the latter case, however, it was the applicant himself who had the duty to lodge a title application at the imperial and royal authorities. This very duty proved to be a major obstacle, especially for politicians. While artists, scientists and officials considered acceptance of noble title as their private business, Czech politicians, representing mostly plebeian society, were in a more delicate situation and, as a result, many of them decided not to make use of the privilege.

Alois Pražák, the leader of Moravian Czechs, was awarded the First Class Knight of the Order of the Iron Crown for his work on the Stremayer's language regulations and other merits on 29 June 1882 and, based on the order, soon became a baron¹⁴. This did not much improve his reputation either in Bohemia or in Moravia, where he was reproached for mistaking the national interests for the interests of the PM Count Taaffe¹⁵. František Ladislav Rieger, the key figure in the Czech politics in the second half of the 19th century, also had to face great difficulties¹⁶. He was awarded the second class knight of the Order of the Iron Crown for co-operating on the construction of the Czech National Theatre in Prague on 26 June 1881; thanks to this award, he was allowed to become a baron. He did not apply for the title until 16 years later not only because he feared the reaction of the public but primarily because he feared rejection by his own family. Rieger's daughter Marie, for instance, made the following note after her father received the title: „I talked to Rieger about the order in early July [1881]. I told him that I did not consider it fair as it happened at a time when the nation was granted nothing. If both the nation and the leader had been granted something, it would have been perfectly all right. However, this way the leader and the nation were separated from each other”¹⁷. When Rieger was, at last, bestowed baronage in 1897¹⁸, no critical voices were heard from the public; his family and his friends, however, remained quite reserved with regards to the award. So did Josef Kalousek, a historian, who wrote down the following words on a letter from F. L. Rieger, who thanked him for his prior congratulations: „I was not truly happy about the baronage, fearing that it would equip Rieger's enemies in Bohemia with a powerful weapon they could use against him, and, ultimately, harming his reputation among Czechs. I, myself,

¹⁴ 9 September 1882. See the Národní archiv (National Archive), Ministerstvo vnitra Vídeň (Ministry of Interior in Vienna), (referred to as NA, ŠA), cart. 39 — Pražák.

¹⁵ *Paměti a listář Dra Aloise Pražáka [Memoirs and Letters of Dr. Alois Pražák]*, ed. F. Kameníček, vol. I, Prague 1926, p. LXIX.

¹⁶ R. R. Novotný, *Nobilitace Františka Ladislava Riegera [Ennoblement of František Ladislav Rieger]*, „Z Českého ráje a podkrkonoší”, 13, 2000, p. 93–120.

¹⁷ *Příspěvky k listářu Dra Frant. Lad. Riegra [Contributions to Letters of Dr. František Ladislav Rieger]*, ed. J. Heidler, Vol. II. *from 1872–1903*, Praha 1926, Letter no. 386, p. 152.

¹⁸ 12 May 1897, in: NA, ŠA, cart. 40 — Rieger.

have regarded Mr. Pražák as a discredited person since he became a baron”¹⁹. Moreover, František Ladislav Rieger’s son Bohuš viewed his Father’s ennoblement as a catastrophe, believing that „Badeni awarded baronage to Rieger in order to discredit him in the Czech politics”²⁰. Rieger’s son-in-law Albín Bráf was so infuriated that, in his letter to Rieger residing at his castle of Maleč, he did not even mention the award. He and Bohuš Rieger later tried to convince him to „publish some kind of a declaration in the papers that could mitigate Rieger’s fault related to the elevation”²¹.

It was not surprising, under the above circumstances, to learn that Rieger had, for a long time, strove to find other ways out of the incident. He attempted, with the help of renowned historians and private researchers, to make his family legend, according to which the Rieger family were of noble descent and became impoverished during the 1600s²², well-founded and thus received a hereditary title through so-called re-ennoblement. While Rieger himself was not successful, many others were. A re-ennobled²³ person not only managed to be elevated to noble ranks without facing public scorn and general impression that he managed to do so thanks to his connections to the cabinet, but could also belong to the old nobility, which was, in general, held in higher esteem than the new one. Moreover, re-ennoblement fees were five times lower than the ennoblement fees (moreover, the fee could be waived in case of the applicant’s poverty) and the advantages linked to re-ennoblement were quite invaluable. Apart from other noble rights, re-ennobled persons were granted the right to apply to noble foundations, which were quite numerous; there were 26 of them only in Bohemia itself. Money one could receive from them was more than a fair compensation for the invested effort and time²⁴. The most famous Czech foundation, for instance, founded by Jan Petr Straka of Nedabylic paid out 600 guildens to noble university students and 500 to grammar school students each year, and provided full board and accommodation to 80 students in the Straka Academy (currently the seat of the Czech cabinet board members) since its construction in 1896.

In Czech lands, the re-ennoblements mainly concerned families whose property was confiscated in the aftermath of the battle at White Mountain in 1620 and the following turmoil of the Thirty Years’ War. In the language used at that time, these families were called Czech national nobility, to distinguish them from the „catholic immigrants” that came and settled in the Crown Lands of Bohemia after the at White Mountain. It was a mark of great prestige to be a member of such family, especially at the times of surging nationalism. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the late 1880s, literally a wave of

¹⁹ Notes on Rieger’s letter from 24 June 1897 made by K a l o u s e k, *Příspěvky k listářů F. L. Riegra*, Vol. II., Letter no. 1220, p. 537.

²⁰ *Příspěvky k listářů F. L. Riegra*, Vol. II., Letter no. 1220, p. 538.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² J. Ž u p a n i ě, *Nobilitace českých elit v Rakousko-uherské monarchii [Czech Élite Nobilitations in Austria-Hungary]*, [in:] *Z Českého ráje a podkrkonoší — supplementum 8. František Ladislav Rieger and the Czech society in 2nd half of 19th century*, Semily 2003, p. 187–188.

²³ It was possible to apply for re-ennoblement on the grounds of a decree issued by Hofkanzlei on 12 October 1840, which granted the right to families unable to use their status for poverty or other reasons.

²⁴ V. E l z n í c, *Nobilitační spisy ve Státním ústředním archivu v Praze [Nobilitation records in the State Central Archive in Prague]*, „Listy Genealogicko-heraldické společnosti v Praze”, 16, 1972, p. 12. Members of the family Holejšovský von Slavětín alone, re-ennobled thanks to documents forged by Jan Vašák, received almost 44,000 crowns from the Count Straka’s foundation fund (NA, ŠA, cart. 29 — Holejšovský von Slavětín).

re-ennoblement hysteria broke out in the Czech lands and lasted more than a decade. During this time, several dozens of families managed to be re-ennobled but only a few of these claims were truly justified. The rest of the re-ennoblement claims were based on skilfully plotted fiction and forgery of the so-called genealogical agents. In the early 20th century, when their practices were revealed, the echoes of the scandal could be heard throughout the whole monarchy²⁵.

Antonín Petr Schlechta, a lawyer and a son of a solicitor living in the North Bohemian town of Turnov, became, though not of his own accord, the key figure in the so-called Prague re-ennoblement suits. Turnov is a town where Schlechta was, according to his words, born to a family of descendants of an old house of Knights of Wssehrd on 11 June 1864. Successfully enough, in 1885 he managed to be re-ennobled, thanks to birth certificates and registrar records, and to be awarded the noble predicate Knight Schlechta Wssehrdský von Wssehrd. At that time he was still a law student but soon after his graduation he started working as a civil servant at the Bohemian Governor's Office. He must have been a good servant since soon after that he was transferred to the royal and imperial Interior Ministry where he worked in the Nobility Department since 1894.

The Nobility Department of the Royal and Imperial Interior Ministry was the Austrian equivalent to heraldic offices in England or Prussia. The department was in charge of ennoblement and armorial certificates issued to natural and legal persons (towns, church institutions etc.) and it was the supreme institution in the area of nobility legislation and genealogical and heraldic issues. The department was also in charge of confirming and renewing noble titles of families who were unable to make use of their status for poverty or other reasons. The legal framework concerning re-ennoblements was provided for in a Hofkanzlei Decree dated 12 October 1840, which made it clear that in order to be re-ennobled, one had to submit a certificate of origin of the noble descent; reality, however, was slightly different. Officials could wink in case of well-off and powerful persons, especially when the interior minister, let alone the Prime Minister, intervened in their favour. Soon, the officials learned that they could make money they had never dreamt of. The incomes of 7th–9th tariff class officials, i. e. of most of the department employees, ranked between 1400 and 3000 guldens; furthermore, we need to take into account that the accommodation costs in Vienna were the highest throughout the monarchy. Moreover, the fees for issuing the certificates were distributed among the department employees, which was the reason why the fees kept continually rising²⁶. This

²⁵ For more details on re-ennoblement processes, see V. Elznic, *Renovitační procesy pražské [Prague re-ennoblement processes]*, special supplement of „Zpravodaj Klubu genealogů a heraldiků v Ostravě“ [„Bulletin of Genealogy and Heraldry Club“] no. VI, Ostrava 1984; J. Županič, *Záhadný původ barona Kapouna aneb těžký život rakouského úředníka [The mysterious Parentage of Baron Kapoun or hard life of an Austrian civil servant]*, „Historický obzor“, 2005 N^o 1–2, p. 22–32.

²⁶ To have an idea, the fees for certificates issued in 1840 compared to those issued in early 20th century were as follows: in 1840: princes — 1500 guldens of conventional currency, counts — 220 guldens, barons — 170 guldens, knights — 150 guldens and noblemen — 120 guldens; in 1914: princes — 3240 guldens, counts — 550 guldens, barons — 440 guldens, knights — 400 guldens and noblemen — 330 guldens; in 1918: princes — 3240 guldens, counts — 1520 guldens, barons — 1060 guldens, knights — 850 guldens and noblemen — 600 guldens. It is clear that issuing a prince certificate was more costly than issuing certificates of lower nobility levels, which were done in red or purple cloth binding; however, the tenfold difference between the price of the prince certificate and nobleman certificate is too striking. The difference in the prices for a knight and nobleman

income was neither low nor high but the employees must have welcomed the possibility to make extra money, especially since they faced almost no risk. Almost everybody must have been involved in the illegal re-ennoblement affairs and practices — rank-and-file employees, department heads as well as ministers.

Everything was, in fact, extremely simple. So-called genealogical agents who often had friends at the Ministry of Interior usually represented re-ennoblement applicants. To cover the necessary costs, an agent obtained an advance payment from the applicant and then, in case the application was successful, also a fee that was often as much as several thousand guildens. The agent searched up the supporting documents, prepared a family tree and sent it to Vienna. Consequently, the file was taken over by his protégé at the ministry, that confirmed the documents as supporting evidence and recommended the application for approval. Due to the increased red tape at the end of 19th century, it was not possible to check all the files, especially given the fact that individual employees at the department were either involved in such practice or at least gave their silent consent to the activities of others. Even though no true connection between civil servants and genealogical agents has ever been proved, it is beyond doubt that it existed and it is highly probable that large part of the fat re-ennoblement fees ended in their pockets. And so things went on for years and could have gone on for even longer, had this ideal state of affairs not been impaired by a fierce animosity between two men — Knight Schlechta and genealogical agent Josef Mejtský.

Mejtský was one of „private researchers” who kept persistently supplying the Ministry of Interior with loads of re-ennoblement applications. He was, doubtlessly, quite a strange character. Despite having been trained as a mere bookstore assistant, he was always trying to give the impression of a better-off scholar. For a short period of time, he published „Slovanské listy” paper and later became an insurance agent. As he claimed, through strenuous autodidact learning, he managed to be as learnt as a grammar school graduate and to master German and partly Latin as well as heraldry and genealogy. He strove to have a scholarly image, and in 1901, he paid for and published an extensive study called „Contributions to the history of nobility in Bohemia including the genealogy of Knights Nebeský von Wojkowicz”²⁷. He dedicated the book to „Jan Křtitel Nebeský von Wojkowicz, a noble man, a landowner and an MP in the Bohemian Diet” (who was, by a mere coincidence, his former client), who most probably covered the publishing costs. This hypothesis is supported by the coloured coat of arms of the Nebeský family on the front page as well as a detailed history of the house that has nothing to do with the topic of the book. The study is surprising for its high academic quality and the polished writing style, inferring that its author must have been of high erudition and have mastered not only history but complex legal matters concerning the position of the Czech nobility from

certificates is, however, even more striking given the fact that both were almost identical. The rising trend in prices (especially the difference between 1914 and 1918 prices) clearly shows that nobility department employees did not care so much about the quality as they did about money. While the fee for a prince certificate had not changed, the fees for other nobility levels, which were awarded much more often during the war than earlier, grew by two or three times. J. Županič, *Nová šlechta Rakouského císařství*, p. 187–189, 204–210.

²⁷ J. Mejtský, *Příspěvky k dějinám šlechty v Čechách s připojením rodopisu rytířů Nebeských z Wojkovic* [*Contributions to the history of the nobility in the Czech lands together with the family tree of Nebeský von Wojkovic*], Praha 1901. I would like to thank Mr. Jakub Hrdlička (Archive of the Capital City of Prague) for providing me with this information and the above publication.

the Middle Ages until most of the 1600s. We need to point attention mainly to the introductory part which was written on the basis of a detailed analysis of Latin sources from the 13th and 14th centuries but also to a particularly high-quality analysis of Czech lower nobility in the period after the battle at White Mountain. Since we know, however, that Mejtský made it only as far as the third grade of primary school, the quality of his paper is not only surprising but also highly astonishing. Fairly enough, we may suppose he had learnt to speak modern German quite well, which would be nothing unusual, and he could have even mastered 16th and 17th century German; however, excellent knowledge of Latin, law and history, that were not only necessary but highly inevitable for producing such work, was in his case absolutely impossible. The same can be said about his ability to use highly polished style of writing. In the blackmailing letters that he wrote later, he proved to be more of a furious and hateful graphomaniac than a highly erudite scholar. Through the above prism, it can be assumed that the author of the „Contribution to the history of nobility” must have been somebody else. There is, however, no further detailed information available clarifying the matter and, Mejtský will probably be always considered the author of this remarkable work.

Mejtský had been engaged in forgery for a lengthy period of time and, in a later trial, he was found guilty of this crime in 49 cases. Like in other cases, the experts did not find it difficult to prove his further forgeries. Mejtský, for instance, tore out one or more pages from the Land register, made a forged copy of them at home and then returned the forgeries back into the book. At times, in order to blind a trail, he made a confirmation of authentication of the forgery and then tore it out²⁸.

Mejtský and Schlechta are likely to have met already in Prague. Since the Ministry of Interior often asked the Bohemian Governor's Office to issue a testimony concerning re-ennoblements, it is understandable that the genealogical agents attempted to find their way to the Czech public servants. It was not Mejtský, however, who got in touch with Schlechta in this „business” matter. It was a genealogical agent Jan Vašák²⁹, a top defrauder. An elegant gentleman at first sight, he was, in reality, a former second-year student who was kicked out of grammar school, to become a trained merchant later. Later on he made his living as a bookkeeper and an insurance company correspondent clerk but then he found out that the money he was earning could not sufficiently satisfy his needs and cover the expenses of his growing family (he had six children at the beginning of 20th century) and plunged into the genealogical business. He was later convicted of earning almost 70 000 crowns on fees from his clients, to whom he obtained forged documents supporting ennoblement claims. At the beginning of the 20th century, this sum alone was exorbitant, let alone together with other, never discovered sums obtained from people who did not confess to cooperating with Vašák. Vašák met Schlechta in 1885 at the latest when he helped him, using forged documents, obtain a knighthood, and kept cooperating with him afterwards. It is not clear whether Vašák was involved in blackmailing or, which is more likely, whether it was a mutually beneficial business, but what is clear is that Schlechta greatly supported the agent's interests.

Jan Vašák's job was not only re-ennoblements but he was involved in a far riskier business. In the late 1800s, he did not hesitate and offered his services even to count

²⁸ V. Elzní c, *Renovilační procesy*, p. 17–19.

²⁹ NA, ŠA, cart. 50 — Vašák.

Julius von Attems, who was arguing with his relatives over a fideicommissum manor in Massenburg in Styria³⁰, which was left abandoned after the death of Baron Eduard von Lazzarini in 1889. To substantiate Attems's claims, Vašák had to make alterations in his family tree. He mainly had to make up family links to Peter von Zollner, the founder of the fideicommissum. Peter von Zollner's last will of November 1600 said that his daughter Barbara got married to the count Nogarola, whose first name was missing. That is why Vašák immediately „revoked” the marriage between Attems's ancestor Franz von Nogarola and Marchioness Brigitte Gherardini and changed his wife's name to Barbara von Zollner. On top of this complicated construction, Vašák forged documents concerning Isabella von Breuner, who was supposed to be this couple's great-great-granddaughter and the mother of Attems's great-grand-father count František Antonín Kořenský von Terešov. According to a record from the Líbeznice parish registrar near Prague, František Antonín was born 28 August 1729 to Count Rudolf Kořenský, and Countess Isabell, née von Breuner. This would have been considered as nothing unusual, had he not been born mere four days after his alleged parents' wedding, who, moreover, were supposed to have got married in Vienna. The court later ruled as follows: „Under the wedding certificate — — Count Rudolf Kořenský and Countess Isabella née von Breuner, had — — their wedding in Vienna on 24 August 1729, which was attended by the Emperor and his court. It is beyond reasonable doubt that the bride — —, would not have gotten married in such a pompous way, had she been in such late pregnancy, delivering her child four days afterwards, and moreover, would not have set off from Vienna to Líbeznice, taking into account the then state of roads and means of transport, to have her child born there³¹. Rudolf Kořenský's name is mentioned in the registrar records with titles he was awarded several years afterwards. Vašák paid no attention to the fact that the marriage between Rudolf and Isabella remained without encumbrance, as Isabella herself mentioned in her last will from 1749. František Antonín was, in fact, a son of Rudolf's brother count Václav Kořenský, whose wife Marie Josefa Šubířová von Chobyně came from lower Bohemian nobility, was not related to Styria nobility, and thus was not entitled to Massenburg fideicommissum, and as a result her claim was absolutely unfounded. Even though the whole affair stirred furor, Vašák was released as he was not found guilty of forgery due to the lack of evidence. It seems more likely, however, that the key reason for declaring the judgement of acquittal was respect paid to Count Attems and his family.

Schlechta's contacts with Vašák proved to be very close in 1891 when the Counsellor at the Interior Ministry Nobility Department (his future colleague), Emil von Less, asked Schlechta to re-examine the authenticity of the documents, which Vašák sent him to Vienna and which were to confirm that his descendants came from an Old Bohemian Knightly house of Less. Without hesitating, Schlechta confirmed their authenticity even though they later proved to have been forged. Since Less's doubts about the documents persisted, he used the services of another agent, who was, not surprisingly, Mejstský himself. In 1894 Schlechta declared that the submitted documents had been forged. That

³⁰ Established on 10 November 1600 by the Baron Peter von Zollner as a seniority inheritable in the Zollner family and its male as well as female descendants. For Investigation record see NA, ŠA, cart. 50 — Vašák, accusatory file dated 10 March 1904, p. 1–68. In early 20th century, its value was estimated at 200 000 crowns. *Ibidem*, p. 45.

³¹ Quotation from: *Ibidem*, p. 62.

is why Less sent the documents, whose authenticity was rejected even by famous historian August Sedláček, back to Mejtský³². Mejtský was very upset, having missed the opportunity to make a large sum of money in fees, and, quite legitimately, blamed Schlechta for this failure. We are not sure whether this was the first case when the interests of the two men conflicted but we know that Mejtský reacted in a rather too hysterical way. He decided to discredit Schlechta in the public and, in his letter to Less, he accused him of forging his own family tree³³. Mejtský acted in a very ingenious way and drafted the letter not as a denunciation but as a report made by a „good citizen” who came across forged records when going through the registrar records. Since Less did not respond to his letters, the rejected genealogical agent tried his luck elsewhere and in a letter dated 4 November 1896 he complained to the very Emperor. He accused not only Schlechta of forging a family tree but also Less. Moreover, he accused both of them for hampering „legitimate re-ennoblement” of his client Jan Křtitel Knight Nebeský von Wojkowicz; what is ridiculous is that the knighthood was awarded to Nebeský based on documents produced by Mejtský. At this time the affair could not be silenced anymore, especially after Mejtský had sent another accusatory file to a prestigious heraldic association Adler seated in Vienna, of which Schlechta was a member. Count von Petenegg, the Chairman of the association, gave the defamatory pamphlet to Schlechta and called upon him to step up against the defamation and defend himself. Schlechta, however, was insulted by Petenegg’s call and left Adler.

At that time the dispute got beyond a mere argument between Mejtský and Schlechta and became discussed by the general public. The Ministry of the Interior, however, was still trying to hush up the affair. The genealogical business, no doubt, involved more persons, given the fact that the top officials at the ministry forbade their own Knight Schlechta to file a legal suit for defamation against Mejtský. Schlechta was becoming an infamous figure and as such, had to be got rid of silently. As a result, on 20 June 1900 he was appointed a District Governor in Bohemia, through an extraordinary promotion he received for „outstanding services”. At the same time he was promised to be granted baronage, to which his alleged ancestor Jan was supposed to have been elevated. Schlechta accepted the new position but, with the consent of his management, he took a long-term paid vacation as soon as on 20 March 1901. He did so in order to purge himself from the accusations, as he told the Czech Governor Count Coudenhove. Moreover, he did not, quite correctly, take the promotion as a reward but more as an attempt made by the Viennese authorities to silence him and send him somewhere where he could remain unnoticed. Furthermore, his view was supported by the fact that in his promotion he skipped 61 other employees on the institutional ladder. Schlechta felt rather hurt by this and wanted to return to Vienna; his excuses that he does not understand the tasks of a regional governor but, on the other hand, he has been handling nobility issues for the past thirteen years were strikingly naive. Moreover, being a civil

³² Emil von Less was re-ennobled as an old Bohemian knight, without the need to submit any supporting documents, in a supreme decision dated 21 August 1896 and in a certificate dated 27 December 1896 (NA, ŠA, cart. 35 — Less).

³³ For case of Schlechta vs. Mejtský see NA, ŠA, cart 45 — Šlechta von Wssehrd, cart. 46 — Šlechta von Wssehrd, Šlechta — case; also in V. E l z n í c, *Renovitační procesy*, p. 9–10, 15–24 (this otherwise very informative work contains, unfortunately, a number of errors, especially in the crucial section Regesta, p. 29–32).

servant and a law graduate he had to be ready to accept any position he had qualification for; the position of a regional governor was definitely one of them.

Having left the civil service, Schlechta was once again a private person and, as such, could not be manipulated. The disputes with Mejtský became more intensive and started to be discussed even in the press, especially in the daily „Čas”. Both adversaries blamed each other for forging documents and many other frauds while the public was having fun. But only until people learnt of the first news on suspicious affairs of the Interior Ministry Nobility Department. What became the highlight was a letter that Knight Schlechta sent to both chambers of the Imperial Council on 29 October 1901 in which he attacked „the extensive swindles concerning nobility matters that the cabinet has been involved in and has kept in secret for many years”³⁴. Shortly after that, whole Prague and later even Vienna was debating the major scandals. The public opinion was radicalized particularly by the speech of a Czech MP Václav Klofáč delivered in the Chamber of Deputies on 25 February 1902³⁵. In his speech, he not only pointed to Schlechta’s case and suspicious re-ennoblement affairs at the Ministry of Interior but fiercely attacked the whole cabinet of Ernst von Koerber. He accused the Prime Minister of trafficking with noble titles and of having a secret fund for bribing journalists. He claimed that „under Koerber, a noble predicate costs an applicant 100 000 to 200 000 guldens, according to informed persons.” An inventor and a big landowner Karl Knight Auer von Welsbach allegedly paid as much as half a million for baronage, and the industrial tycoon Emil Knight von Kubinzky allegedly paid a similar amount for obtaining the same title³⁶. What used to be a ridiculous skirmish between a slightly corrupted civil servant and a genealogical agent, became, after Klofáč’s speech a far-reaching affair. It was no longer ministry’s internal matter or a common bribery case and it was the cabinet’s reputation itself that was in stake. The value and meaning of a noble title itself was discredited, when Klofáč proclaimed: „We do not want any nobility, we deny any right to existence to it, particularly since we know that it includes members that became noble not out of merit granted to the state but thanks to a contribution to a secret fund of a cabinet that is hostile to us!”

The affair must have made the cabinet feel quite uneasy. Unfortunately, however, we have no detailed reports on stances of the Prime Ministers and his cabinet. A historian thus finds himself on a very thin ice of tempting theories and unfounded deductions. One is tempted to think that since the noble title scandal was too far from being secret, the cabinet tried to find another solution to the problem: discredit the key actor Schlechta and shift the public focus from the sale of noble titles to their questionable approval practices. The doubtful approval procedures were said to have been in practice for decades, and therefore Körber’s cabinet could not be held responsible. Moreover, it could have been a secret activity of several employees at the department, a mere bribery, which the cabinet could have been absolutely unaware of. This cannot be claimed for sure though the idea is quite tempting despite the following events that contradict it.

³⁴ A. P. Šlechta von Wssehrd, *Můj čestný boj [My Straight Fight]*, Jičín 1902, p. 2.

³⁵ Transcript of the speech by Václav Klofáč made at the 97th meeting of the session no. XVII of the Chamber of Deputies of the Imperial Council dated 25 February 1902, In: NA, ŠA, cart. 31 — Kapoun von Svojkov; applies to the following quotations.

³⁶ Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv, Adelsarchiv, Emil Ritter von Kubinzky, Freiherrnstand 1901; ibidem, Karl Ritter Auer von Welsbach, Freiherrnstand 1901.

While the noble titles sale affair was slowly fading away, the case concerning re-ennoblements was augmenting. Police and the Land Criminal Court in Prague started to be involved in the case. At last, Schlechta had his own trial — only in a little bit different way than he envisaged. He did not appear in front of the court in the position of the prosecutor but instead, as the defendant, together with Josef Mejtský, Jan Vašák and several other genealogical agents³⁷. A number of houses were searched, dozens of people were summoned and cross-examined. The investigation lasted almost two years and, to the surprise of officials in charge, the case was getting bigger and bigger. Panic burst out not only at the Ministry of Interior and the Bohemian Governor's Office but also in many newly ennobled families that obtained their titles thanks to the acts of the accused businessmen. Due to then modern expert opinions, their elaborate family trees were torn into pieces. Thousands of guldens invested into such prestigious business were forever lost and the family reputation was forever destroyed.

Trials were slowly approaching their ends. In February 1903, Josef Mejtský was found guilty of multiple fraud offences and sentenced to three years of imprisonment and three months of fasting. Guilty of the same offence in September 1903, Jan Vašák was sentenced to 15 months of imprisonment and a month of fasting. Knight Antonín Petr Schlechta heard his sentence of „five months of imprisonment and a month of fasting” earlier, on 24 November 1902. The reason was forgery of documents with the aim of obtaining noble title, whereas his frauds at the ministry were, surprisingly enough, not a subject of investigation at all. To his detriment, Schlechta was accused of using the title of Baron even though it had not yet been granted but only promised to him. As the court established that Schlechta used forged documents during his re-ennoblement in 1885 and his knighthood was cancelled based on an order dated 19 December 1903. Schlechta, needless to say, was not the only one affected this way. Besides him, more than twenty other families were deprived of their titles, only some of which managed to obtain their noble title again in the years that followed³⁸. The men tried at the Land Criminal Court in Prague were not the only ones punished. The Ministry of Interior, in particular the Nobility Department, saw an earthquake after which no stone remained unturned. Most of the employees were transferred elsewhere, dismissed or pensioned. Schlechta's boss, Knight von Less was pensioned already in 1901. It is not surprising after this affair that the Ministry of Interior became much stricter when awarding noble titles. Unlike in the 1880s and 1890s, at this time the application procedure was not at all lenient and the authorities started putting too much stress on unimportant details. Many eligible re-ennoblement applications remained pending or were approved only on the basis of an order issued by the royal and imperial administrative court in Vienna.

Dozens of people lost their titles in the re-ennoblement affairs. They were not only deprived of their privileged position, which might have been only symbolic, but in many cases, especially in smaller towns or in the country, were deprived of their hard-won social status. It is not surprising that most of them tried hard to regain their

³⁷ Namely Alois Knight Müller von Mildeberg, Antonín Knight Růžek von Rowné and Adolf Řídký. Christian Bruckner, the doyen of this „association”, who made his business by forging certificates as early as in the beginning of 1860s, had already died before the trial started.

³⁸ For more details see below.

titles. Majority of them were unsuccessful but there were, however, a handful of those who managed to be awarded the title once again, though mostly with the help of their influential friends³⁹.

³⁹ Namely the following families were involved (the year they were ennobled or awarded a certificate is mentioned in the brackets): Balthazar von Babakdol (1904), Balthazar Edler von Bachlinden (1906), Ritter Böhm von Bawenberg (1907), Freyherr (Strohmayer-)Frey von Freyenfels (1918), Freiherr (Beleznay-)Hoschek von Mühlheim zu Fürstwalden und Herberstorff (1912, 1914 and 1918), von Hubka (1917), Ritter von Mettal (1911), Stohwasser Edler von Feldtreu (1908) and Ritter Tobisch von Labotýn (1912 and 1915). For more details see: J. Županič, *Renobilitace a problém šlechtictví na konci Rakousko-uherské monarchie* [*Renobilitation and nobility issues at the dawn of the Austro-Hungarian Empire*], *Heraldika a genealogie*, vol. 38, 2005, no. 3–4, p. 168–203.