

ARTICLES

**The Czech School Foundation in Volhynia,
1921–1939**

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It was certainly a great merit of the Czech School Foundation (CSF) that it undertook the difficult task of organizing Czech private education in Volhynia in accordance with the provisions of the Czechoslovak-Polish Treaty. The most difficult thing was to overcome the lack of funds, which were being obtained in the form of regular fund-raising collections once or twice a year and extraordinary fund-raising events on various occasions – parties, weddings, baptisms, etc. The Czech education system in Volhynia also received material assistance (textbooks, pupils' libraries, teachers) from the school administration of the Czechoslovak Republic and from Comenius, the Association for the Support of Czechoslovak Foreign Schools.

Key words: *Volhynia; Czechs; School Foundation; 1921–1939*

The restoration of peace immediately led Czech minority workers in western Volhynia to attempt to restore Czech education in order to overcome the unfortunate situation left by the pre-war Russified school and the war period as quickly as possible. At the beginning of the 1920s, out of 20811 Czechs over the age of ten, 16,711 (80.3%) could read and 4100 were illiterate (19.7%, 38% in Poland as a whole). Of the total number of literate Czechs, 5,358 had only home education, 11262 graduated from primary school, 59 from secondary school, 18 from vocational school and 14 from university.¹ Although many villages were destroyed by the events of the war, the Czechs from Volhynia paid the primary attention to the restoration of school buildings. In the school year 1920–1921, there were 29 public and 5 private Czech schools in western Volhynia. In 1921–1922, all private schools were taken over by the state and, in addition, ten new Czech schools were opened.

¹ Naše zahraničí (NZ), (1930), vol. 3, p. 125.

Thus, a total of 1974 pupils attended 44 Czech schools, of which 1,600 were of the Orthodox religion.² There were 58 teachers in the schools, of whom 42 were Czechs, 10 Russians and Ukrainians, 5 Poles and 1 German. Of the 42 Czech teachers, only 6 went to a Czech school, while 36 went to a Russian school. Schools were mostly one-class with three to four departments. Lessons were in Czech, starting with the second department, there were 4 lessons a week in Polish. Personnel costs were taken over by the state, while the material costs were taken care of by the municipalities. There were different standards of the schools; they varied in quality from well-equipped schools to country cottages with small windows and clay floors.³ There were 4727 Czech children at school age; this means that more than half of them, especially from the smaller colonies, went to Polish schools, studied at home or did not study at all.

At the initiative of the Organizational Club in Volhynia, on July 17, 1921, the Congress of representatives of Czech municipalities in Polish Volhynia took place in the capital of the Volhynian Voivodeship of Lutsk; its main purpose was to establish the Czech School Foundation (CSF) and economic organization of Czech settlements.⁴ The activities of the CSF were to be organized according to the model of the Central School Foundation in Bohemia. Until 1939, the CSF remained the most important Czech association in Volhynia and played an important role in organizing the local Czech education and culture. In major Czech settlements, the CSF established its unions, the so-called “kolo”, where all the organizational, financial and material assistance to the Czech educational system was concentrated. The post-war temporary measures in the area of the Czech education system in Poland was governed by the Czechoslovak-Polish Treaty on Legal and Financial Matters, concluded in Warsaw on April 23, 1925. Under this agreement, the teaching of children in their mother tongue was to be ensured and any pressure on parents to send children to schools teaching in a language other than their mother tongue was declared illegal. It was the duty of the state to open a state minority school wherever a national minority accounted for one quarter of the population of a municipality and where compulsory school attendance applied to at least forty children belonging to that minority. This at first sight liberal provision, however, collided with the fact that in Volhynia, there were large municipalities (‘gminas’), including a number of not only Czech, but also Ukrainian settlements, and in no ‘gmina’, the number of Czechs reached 25%.

² NZ (1922–1923), vol. 1, p. 32.

³ There, vol. 2, p. 84.

⁴ Památník založení a desetileté činnosti České matice školské v Republice polské (1933). Luck, p. 3.

For the Czech minority, this resulted only in the use of other articles of the Treaty that allowed the opening of private schools teaching in the minority's language with the right of the public. In this case, however, all personal and material expenses were borne by the minority organization which established the school, while the Ministry provided support only at its choice.⁵

It was certainly a great merit of the CSF that it undertook the difficult task of organizing Czech private education in Volhynia in accordance with the provisions of the Czechoslovak-Polish Treaty. The most difficult thing was to overcome the lack of funds, which were being obtained in the form of regular fund-raising collections once or twice a year and extraordinary fund-raising events on various occasions – parties, weddings, baptisms, etc. The Czech education system in Volhynia also received material assistance (textbooks, pupils' libraries, teachers) from the school administration of the Czechoslovak Republic and from Comenius, the Association for the Support of Czechoslovak Foreign Schools. Despite this, Czech School Foundation schools suffered from a permanent shortage of teachers, as there was little interest in the teaching profession among the Czech Volhynian youth (in the school year 1925–1926, only three Volhynian Czechs studied at Polish teacher training institutes).⁶ At Czech schools, mainly graduates were active from the Polish teacher seminar in Ostrzeszów in the Poznań region, who came from Zelov and Kučov in the Łódź region.⁷

The Articles of Association of the CSF in Volhynia based in Lutsk were approved on October 4, 1923.⁸ The first General Assembly of the CSF was held on December 2, 1923 in Lutsk with the participation of 192 delegates. Vladimír Preisler was elected a chairman of the CSF main administration, Josef Vlk was elected its vice-chairman, and Josef Albrecht secretary. Initially, each member contributed 8 kg of rye, 75% of which remained to the local union; the rest went to the headquarters. Later it was set at two zlotys per year.

In connection with the introduction of joint schools for all children, regardless of nationality, the number of Czech schools gradually decreased. As at March 1, 1923, there were 40 Czech schools with 1944 pupils, as at September 1, 1924, only 22 Czech schools, but in addition, two Utraquist Czech-Polish schools, and a number of Polish schools taught the Czech language as a subject. As at April 1, 1925, the number of purely Czech schools dropped to 12.⁹

⁵ NZ (1926), vol. 1, pp. 26–28; Komenský (1933–1934), pp. 193–195; Sbirka zákonů a nařízení státu Československého (1926), vol. 33, pp. 271–308. 119; NZ (1926), vol. 1, pp. 26–28.

⁶ NZ (1926), vol. 1, pp. 26–28.

⁷ NZ (1922–1923), vol. 2, p. 87.

⁸ Dziennik Urzędowy Wojewódstwa Wolyńskiego (1923), No. 2, p. 1.

⁹ Klíma, S. (1925). Čechové a Slováci za hranicemi. Praha, p. 82.

The Polish embassy in the Czechoslovak Republic denied news from the “*Národní listy*” newspaper, which in March 1925 wrote about the oppression of Czech education in Volhynia. This official denial admitted errors and mistakes and tried to justify them by saying that Polish education was still at the early stages of its organization.¹⁰ Also the Olomouc People’s Party’s “*Našinec*” paper published that the Polish authorities had attacked the Czech schools and closed them down. According to the paper, all Czech teachers were dismissed in the Lutsk district and the action continued in the Dubno district. The pretext for the dismissal of Czech teachers was lack of their qualification; qualified teachers were then transferred to Ukrainian schools.¹¹

The dismal conditions of the Czech education system in Volhynia, when in the school year 1924–1925 the Polish authorities even organized collecting signatures of Volhynian Czechs in favour of Polish schools and when teachers were being removed, made the CSF Supervisory Board to file a memorandum addressed to the Minister of Culture and Education and to the Polish Committee for the Eastern Border Region. The memorandum contained ten requirements, inter alia: each Czech settlement should have its own school with Czech as a teaching language; the leading teachers should have a perfect command of the Czech language; the government should maintain one teacher per forty pupils; teachers from Czechoslovakia should be recruited; the Czech School Inspectorate should be established; and Czechoslovak academic diplomas should be recognized.¹²

During the debate on the Czechoslovak-Polish Treaty regulating legal and financial issues, the leader of the National Democrats, K. Kramář, spoke about the position of the Czech minority in Volhynia at the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Czechoslovak Chamber of Deputies on February 24, 1926. Among other things, he emphasized the merits of the Volhynian Czechs in the first foreign resistance and demanded that negotiations be commenced with the Polish government that “the provision of 40 children for a public school in the municipality should also apply to settlements”.¹³

It was stated at the General Assembly of the CSF held on February 28, 1928 that this educational and cultural institution had fifty local unions with 1870 members. It had already managed nine Czech private schools, which were equipped with school supplies from Czechoslovakia. It had subscriptions to 400 magazines and was buying a number of books from Czechoslovakia. Vladimír Mesner was elected the new chairman of the CSF instead of Jan Janata of Boratín, who had performed this function in 1925–1928.

¹⁰ Archive Office of President of Republic Prague (AOPR), D 4084/25.

¹¹ *Našinec* (1925), No. 62.

¹² *Hlas Volyně* (HV) (1926), No. 5, pp. 2–3; No. 6, p. 3.

¹³ *Věstník Ústředního sdružení Čechů a Slováků z Ruska* (ÚSČSR) (1925–1926), No. 8, p. 8.

At the beginning of 1929, the first congress of the chairmen of individual CSF unions was held. Chairman Vladimír Mesner informed that there were 24 state schools in Volhynia, where Czech teachers worked and where lessons were taught in Czech or Czech was a taught subject. At another 9 state schools, Czech was taught by teachers of other nationalities, for example Poles from the Cieszyn region. At that time, there were 14 CSF schools, in which mostly Czech was used as a teaching language. Mesner also noted the need for a further 15–20 Czech teachers for state schools.¹⁴

In 1929, the 6th General Assembly of the CSF was held in Zdolbunov, where a Czech school operated, which in the years 1917–1922 was maintained by the Czech Committee and 1922–1934 by “Česká beseda”. The majority of Czech children in Volhynia attended state schools, where they had the opportunity of being taught the Czech language (2360 pupils in 1928–1929), while only 390 pupils attended Czech private schools.¹⁵ There was the Czech Teachers’ Association operating in Volhynia under the CSF, which was chaired by teacher Vladimír Ficek from Semiduby, later by Vladimír Tomáš from Kvasilov.¹⁶ In January 1932, the Association organized its first conference and general assembly in Lutsk.¹⁷

The CSF had no guaranteed income; membership fees were negligible, support from the Polish state minimal. In 1932, the CSF received 15 thousand zlotys from Czechoslovakia, 8 thousand from voluntary fund-raising collections, 7 thousand from individual local unions, 2 thousand from the sale of books and 2 thousand from membership fees. The expenditures went to Foundation schools (20 thousand zlotys), administration (12 thousand), and support for Czech students at teacher training institutes (1 thousand).¹⁸ By 1932, the CSF had raised a total of 31,000 thousand zlotys among Volhynian Czechs.

Of the thirteen Czech private schools (in 1932–1933), the school in Zdolbunov was organized as a seven-year school, in Lutsk and Rovno as a five-year school and in other places a four-year school. There were 524 pupils and 17 teachers in these schools. The teaching language was Czech, except for the Polish language, Polish history and Polish geography, which were taught in Polish.

Following the example of Polish fully organized seven-class schools, the CSF counted on the extension of the Lutsk school, which was to become the basis of the future private Czech secondary school, to a higher type school. In 1937, this was

¹⁴ Buditel (1929), No. 6.

¹⁵ Ročenka ČSR (1930), Praha 1930, p. 27.

¹⁶ Náš buditel (NB) (1931), No. 4, pp. 33–34.

¹⁷ HV (1932), No. 6.

¹⁸ Deset let České matice školské (1933). Luck, table. XIV.

a five-class school with seven successive grades and five full-time and three external teachers. A total of 170 pupils paid up to 35 zlotys per year of tuition, in the case of more children from one family a total of 50 zlotys. The pupils came from families of farmers (112), sole traders (35), workers (14), clerks (7) and entrepreneurs (2). There were only eleven pupils from ethnically mixed families, and all but five were of Czech nationality. Most of the pupils came from the surroundings of Lutsk, as only about eighty Czech families lived in the town.¹⁹ The school had a student library with 266 volumes, a teacher's library with 98 volumes and 120 textbooks, and a library for adults with 250 volumes. A parents' association cooperated with the school, helped organize school events and ensured public relations. Material provision was ensured by the CSF department, which set the amount of the school fee and obtained funds to maintain the school. The school reading room was maintained by the pupil self-government from the income from various entertainments. Available Czech magazines included *Lípa*, *Radost*, *Naše práce*, *Mladý svět*, *Poškolák* and *Našim dětem*. The pupil self-government also managed the inner life of the school and taught the children democratic coexistence and association behaviour. Pupils learned to independently organize school events and to behave there in a proper way. In the CSF boarding school, they paid 35 zlotys per month in cash or in kind.²⁰

The CSF school in Rovno was established in 1926 and had 98 pupils and 3 teachers in the mid-1930s; the school administrator Vladimír Vlček from Říčany near Prague was paid by the Czechoslovak Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment. The Rovno CSF school had four successive grades, a pupil library with 261 volumes and the CSF library with 763 volumes. It had subscription to eighteen magazines from the Czechoslovak Republic, such as the *Národní politika*, *Venkov* and *Hvězda*. From the funds obtained from the enrolment and differentiated tuition fees, a religion teacher and a school caretaker were maintained and rent was paid.

In 1930 in Zdobunov they decided to build a new two-storey modern school building, which was handed over for use in 1934, when the school was taken over from CSF *Česká beseda*. The school was attended by 150 pupils every year. The new school building was built with the support of the Comenius Association in Prague and the Czechoslovak Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment. The CSF maintained the school from collections, parties and concerts. In the interwar period, it was run by Ljuba Vlasáková, Antonín Masopust and Josef Kosek.

The regular General Assembly of the CSF held in Zdobunov on 7 March 1937 was attended by the Legation Secretary of the press service of the Czechoslovak

¹⁹ Folprecht, J. (1937). *Československé školské obce v zahraničí*. Praha, pp. 111–112.

²⁰ National Archive Prague (NA), Ministry of Education (ME), cardboard. 3996.

Embassy in Poland, Josef Hejret. Delegates of individual CSF unions acknowledged the need to establish an agricultural school in Volhynia or agricultural courses possibly connected with a family school. CSF expenditures went primarily to teachers' salaries (34 thousand zlotys per year). Salaries of Foundation teachers of 100 zlotys (starting salary) to 250 zlotys (after 25 years of service) corresponded to the salaries of teachers at state schools. Teachers from the Czechoslovak Republic were paid better (in compensation for increased expenditures) and worked in the main schools (Lutsk, Rovno, Zdolbunov). The teacher conference, which took place before the General Assembly of the CSF, was also attended by the inspector of the Volhynian School Board in Rovno. The CSF applied for public rights also for Foundation schools; but even without that, the school certificates from Foundation schools were respected in the same way as from public schools. After the application was submitted, the School Board carried out rigorous reviews at the CSF schools, which were more successful in larger schools than in smaller schools. The CSF established a special pedagogical committee to monitor the didactic and pedagogical level of teachers. For 1937, the CSF provided 18 thousand zlotys for construction purposes, in particular for the construction of the school in Rovno, as the then makeshift solution did not comply with the regulations. From the total income of the CSF for 1936 amounting to 78 thousand zlotys, over 50 thousand zlotys came from the Czechoslovak Republic. The CSF directly took care of only 680 pupils of the Foundation schools (1935–1936), while 2790 Czech children attended state schools.²¹

A committee headed by teacher Křivka of Straklov was elected at the General Assembly; the committee was to prepare the publication of the history of the Czech colonies in Volhynia. In May 1938, Ing. Alois Knotek was commissioned to write this publication, and he began his studies in the museum libraries in Lutsk, Rovno, Dubno and Ostroh.²² However, the Polish-German War in 1939 frustrated the promisingly commenced work, because the author became missing.

In December 1937, the CSF sent to the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs a submission containing a summary of the most urgent requirements of Volhynian Czechs. The requirements concerned both education and other areas of minority life. Among other things, it required the following: establishment of a Czech school of economics and family with professors from the Czechoslovak Republic and of a Czech technical school; removal of obstacles to the issuance of cheap passports and sending money to the Czechoslovak Republic to cover the expenses related to study; and permitting organized trips of children to Czechoslovakia using a cheap

²¹ Archives of Ministry of Foreign Office Prague (AMFO), f. Warsaw Embassy, political news 1937, 13. 3. 1937.

²² *Krajanské listy* (KL), 1, 1938, No. 25, p. 4.

common passport.²³ The Czech School Foundation assumed that in the second half of the 1930s, the minority did not have its representative in the Polish government to defend its interests, and had to therefore negotiate with it through the Czechoslovak Republic, which was to enforce its requirements in international negotiations with Poland. The requirements of the CSF were primarily aimed at improving the situation in the Czech education system in Volhynia, facilitating contacts with the Czechoslovak Republic and creating space for the activities of the associations.²⁴ However, the Czechoslovak Embassy in Poland commented on the submission of the minority that the current state of Czechoslovak-Polish relations was not suitable for submitting any requests, as Poland did not recognize the principle of reciprocity between the Czech minority in Poland and the Polish one in the Czechoslovak Republic.²⁵

On 6 March 1938, it was stated at the General Assembly of the CSF that the situation of Czechs in Volhynia was deteriorating as a result of the overall Polish policy towards national minorities. The establishment of complete seven-class schools threatened the existence of Czech schools with fewer classes. In seven-class schools, Czech children represented only an insignificant minority, which negatively influenced the existence of teaching Czech as a subject. Czech state school teachers were increasingly being replaced by Poles from the Cieszyn region, who – according to the authorities – had an excellent command of the Czech language (10–12 persons). In 1938, the Czechs had only three private seven-class schools (Lutsk, Rovno, Zdolbunov); the other private schools only had one class.²⁶ Under the impression of the meeting of the Czechoslovak Prime Minister Milan Hodža with the Polish minority in Czechoslovakia, some speakers at the CSF General Assembly asked for establishing a delegation that would hand over the requirements of Volhynian Czechs to the Polish Prime Minister, General Felician Sławoj-Skladkowski. A commission was elected at the General Assembly to draw up a memorandum and submit it first to the Duke of Volhynia, Henryk Józewski. The task of another commission was to write a chronicle of Volhynian Czechs.

The last General Assembly of the Czech School Foundation was held on 5 March 1939 in Lutsk. It noted many obstacles in the Foundation activities. The modest Czech education in Volhynia was endangered; positively evaluated were the contributions of the Czechoslovak Republic to the building of schools and teachers' salaries.²⁷ In August 1939, the CSF administration convened an unofficial meeting

²³ AMFA, f. 2. section, c. 255.

²⁴ There, 17. 1. 1938.

²⁵ There, f. 2. section, c. 255, 8. 4. 1938.

²⁶ There, Warsaw Embassy, political news 1938, 7. 3. 1938.

²⁷ KL (1939), No. 17.

of representatives of Czech settlements in Volhynia to Lutsk, where Juraj Slávik, the Czechoslovak envoy in Poland spoke, and where the Volhynian Czechs expressed their support for the Czechoslovak foreign resistance.

In the years 1926–1939, Czech teachers provided by the Czechoslovak Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment played an irreplaceable role. They operated both in large CSF schools and in some state schools. Already in the school year 1926–1927, the Ministry sent six teachers from the Czechoslovak Republic to Volhynia; the Ministry paid them and ensured their lifelong provision in the Czechoslovak Republic upon their return. In 1931, four teachers from the Czechoslovak Republic worked in Volhynia, namely in Rovno, Zdolbunov, Mirohošť and Kupičov.²⁸ However, on January 17, 1932, teacher Jan Kozák was forced to leave Mirohošť, as he was not allowed to stay by the authorities. His educational activities encountered resistance of Polish nationalists, were labelled political and he himself was declared an extreme chauvinist who did not respect his superiors and school authorities and disrupted the peaceful coexistence of Volhynian Czechs with the local population.²⁹

In 1932, teacher Karel Švarc was sent from the Czechoslovak Republic to the Polish-Czech state school in Malín. Already during his nomination, the Polish Embassy in the Czechoslovak Republic found out that he was an active member of the Czechoslovak National Socialist Party and Sokol.³⁰ The report of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs even stated that his activities in the Party were more intensive than in the pedagogical field. In addition to Švarc, other teachers also worked in Volhynia in 1933: Vladimír Vlček at the CSF school in Rovno, Josef Kosek at the Česká beseda school in Zdolbunov and Josef Kredba at the CSF school in Lutsk.³¹ However, the extracurricular activities of teachers from the Czechoslovak Republic aroused the extreme displeasure of Polish nationalists. Švarc was accused by a school inspector in Dubno of a disloyal attitude to the Polishness of the school and chauvinistic attitudes, by which he allegedly influenced the local Czech population and youth.³² The immediate dismissal of Švarc was prevented by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as in the Czechoslovak Republic, the change could be interpreted as a deterioration of the position of the Czech minority in Volhynia.³³ In 1935, the school board of trustees in Rovno

²⁸ NB (1931), No. 1, p. 8.

²⁹ Archive of New File Warsaw (ANF), f. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), sign. 10 625, c. 31–32.

³⁰ ANF, f. MFA, sign. 5699. 16. 6. 1932.

³¹ There, 14. 9. 1933.

³² There, 2. 5. 1934.

³³ There, 27. 5. 1934.

again turned to the Ministry of Culture and Enlightenment with a request for Švarc's dismissal. This time, no foreign policy considerations were made, so the contract for the next school year was no longer renewed with Švarc.³⁴

Another teacher from the Czechoslovak Republic, Josef Albl, became the successor of Švarc in Malín. The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs recommended showing the maximum of objectivism in relation to the Volhynian Czechs and accepting Albl. As the Polish Embassy in Prague did not find any public engagement of Albl, it gave the Ministry of Culture and Enlightenment its consent to his employment as of 1 September 1936.³⁵

The state schools attended by Czech pupils were of various types. Although Czech teachers taught in Czech-Polish schools (11 schools), at least half of the subjects and lessons were taught in Polish. In Polish-Czech schools (14 schools), where a large part of the teachers were Poles, the Czech language was taught only as a subject. This was also the case in Polish-Ukrainian schools (7 schools). In the second half of the 1930s, 1,800 Czech pupils attended these three types of schools. Hundreds of other Czech children (850) were forced to attend Polish schools where no Czech language was taught.³⁶ The Czechs built 53 school buildings at their own expense.

Courses had been organized for Czech teachers since 1927, at which Maxmilián Kolaja, a professor at the Brno Industrial School, taught Czech language, and professional teacher Stanislav Vrána from Brno taught pedagogy. Forty teachers took part in the courses.³⁷ Those interested from Volhynia also attended courses for Czech foreign teachers organized in the Czechoslovak Republic. In 1922, 14 male and 5 female teachers took part in such a course.³⁸ Holiday stays in the Czechoslovak Republic were organized also for the children of foreign compatriots under the care of the Czech Heart organization. For example, in 1927, 58 children accompanied by three guides took part in a ten-day stay in Prague organized for children from Volhynia.³⁹ In 1931, 18 boys and girls took part in the expedition.

The deterioration of Polish-Czechoslovak relations in connection with the question of the Těšín region in the second half of the 1930s also affected Czech schools in Volhynia. In Rovno, Zdolbunov and Lutsk, Polish protesters soiled the windows of Czech schools.⁴⁰

³⁴ There, 14. 10. 1935.

³⁵ There, 30. 10. 1935; There, 23. 3. 1936; There, 19. 5. 1936.

³⁶ *Statystyka szkolnictwa 1937–1938* (1939). Warszawa, p. 26.

³⁷ *NZ* (1937), vol. 3, p. 137; There, (1930), No. 4, p. 170; There, No. 5, pp. 218–219.

³⁸ There, (1922–1923), vol. 3, pp. 126–128.

³⁹ *NZ* (1927), vol. 3, p. 149.

⁴⁰ ANF, f. MFO, sign. 5698.