

The Transformation of the Sokol Sports Complex in Brno

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the historical evolution and transformation of the Sokol's multi-functional sports complex at the Brno Reservoir. Originally conceived in the 1930s by the Sokol Brno I unit, the complex was envisioned as a comprehensive sports and recreational facility that would advance the physical education ideals of the Sokol movement. Over time, the complex experienced significant changes driven by political, social, and economic forces, including periods of neglect and revival. Today, it remains operational, offering a diverse range of sports and recreational activities, however very different from the original intentions, while preserving its legacy as a cultural and social landmark in the Brno region.

The aim of this study is to analyze the historical development of the complex, assess key political, social, and economic influences on its transformation, and evaluate its contemporary role in Czech physical education and sports traditions. The study draws on a thorough historical analysis of primary sources, including archival documents, meeting records, and contemporary periodicals, supplemented by secondary literature on Sokol's history. Methodologically, the study employs chronological reconstruction, qualitative analysis of socio-political influences on the development of the complex, and comparative analysis to identify patterns and discrepancies in the historical record. The findings reveal that the complex functioned not only as a recreational hub but also as a symbol of resilience and community spirit, especially during periods of adversity under Nazi occupation and the Communist regime. The article concludes by examining the post-1989 restoration of the complex, emphasizing its ongoing role in preserving Czech cultural and physical education traditions.

Keywords: Sokol, Sokol unit, Sokol movement, Sokol Brno I, Sokolské koupaliště, Brno Reservoir, physical education

INTRODUCTION

The Sokol movement in the *Czech Republic* has played a significant role in the development of physical education and sports. As a pioneer in promoting physical education among the general public, the *Sokol* organization extended its activities beyond just sports, aiming to improve the overall health and physical fitness of the population. *Sokol* units were responsible for constructing numerous gyms, sports facilities, and recreational areas, which provided extensive opportunities for sports activities. Many of these facilities have remained operational for decades and continue to serve the public today. Some of the facilities which were built through the efforts of the members of *Sokol* are now significant cultural and/or architectural landmarks. In this manner, the *Sokol* unit has played an important role in shaping the cultural landscape of the *Czech Republic*. However, as we will show, the story of this *Sokol* complex is somewhat less straightforward than it was elsewhere.

One of the significant projects undertaken by *Sokol Brno I* was the creation of a specialized *Sokol* Multi-functional Sports Complex, commonly locally known by the simplified local name *Sokolské koupaliště* (*Sokol Swimming Pool*), or simply *Sokolák*, located at the *Brno Reservoir*. This popular name, based on the word “swimming,” is somewhat misleading, as the original intention was to develop a multi-functional sports complex, focused on a variety of sports activities, including swimming, platform diving, tennis, ball games, calisthenics, yachting, canoeing, powerboating, and camping, as well as other recreational activities for a wide range of *Sokol* members. In the following text, to avoid confusion from the simplified name, we will refer to the entire sports complex with the more accurate term „*Sokol* Multi-functional Sports Complex,” abbreviated as „the Complex.”

The construction of this facility on the left bank of the *Brno Reservoir*, between the dam and *Osada*, was the culmination of the association's efforts to keep pace with the demands of the time and to create a solid foundation for the growing trend of integrating sports with nature. With this intention, the *Sokol* unit aimed to create the most modern, universal sports facility of its time for these types of sports activities. In the relatively prosperous 1930s, it is unlikely that any of the proponents of this idea could have anticipated the magnitude of the extraordinary social upheavals that were rapidly approaching. These events ultimately prevented the collective dream from being fully realized, leaving the project forever incomplete.

This study examines the history and development of this area, tracing its origins back to 1933 when *Sokol* members first began planning its construction. Over the years, the Complex went through various developmental phases influenced by political and social changes, which this article explores. The history of this geographically small area tells a vivid story of the successes and challenges of one initiative, good ideas and serious implementation mistakes, paralleling the rise and fall of the *Sokol* community and its repeated renewals. This particular story serves as a strong testament to the extraordinary power and appeal of the *Sokol* idea, which enabled the unit's members to continue pursuing similar projects even in very difficult times.

METHOD

This study is based on historical research, incorporating a comprehensive analysis of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include archival materials from the *Brno City Archive* and the *Moravian Land Archive*, along with annual reports, meeting minutes, and various documents from the *Tělovýchovná jednota Sokol Brno I*, which provide direct insights into the history of the Complex. Secondary sources consist of periodicals such as *Věstník sokolský* (*Sokol bulletin*) and *Tyrš* (*Sokol journal*), which offer contemporary reports on *Sokol's* activities. Historical monographs and publications on *Sokol's* history were also used to provide context.

The research methods employed in this study include detailed historical analysis to reconstruct the chronological development of the Complex, qualitative analysis to understand the motivations, challenges, and impacts associated with its development, and comparative analysis to identify recurring themes and discrepancies in historical records. An interpretative analysis was also conducted to examine the political and social factors that influenced the construction and operation of the site.

RESULTS

The Brno Reservoir Area in the Pre-World War II Era

In the 1930s, when individual transportation was almost non-existent, increasing numbers of holidaymakers and tourists were drawn to the *Kníničky* area, initially via buses on the *Brno–Veverská Bítýška* line and, from 1930 onwards, also by Brno's public transport, which extended as far as *Bystrc*, an area near the *Brno Reservoir*. The ravine near *Kníničky* thus became the birthplace of South Moravian tramping in 1925, several years before the reservoir was filled (Fasora, 2017, p. 658; Hurikán, 1990, p. 181). These developments prompted the *Sokol* unit's tourist section to rent a meadow on the *Svratka River's* bank, just beyond the *Obora* forest near *Veverí Castle*. In 1935, the unit constructed its own cabin on this site, providing essential facilities and allowing members to stay overnight (Zpráva, 1937, p. 53).

The plan for the *Brno Reservoir* waterworks¹ captivated nearly all of Brno in the 1930s, as many residents, inspired by the growing trend of reconnecting with nature, began building recreational cottages in the surrounding forests.

In line with this general trend, sometime in the late 1920s or early 1930s, the idea of utilizing the future reservoir for sports and recreation gradually crystallized within the *Brno Sokol* movement.

1 The first project for constructing a dam with a smaller impoundment on the *Svratka River* near *Kníničky* was developed as early as 1872. However, it was not until 1911 that a comprehensive water management plan for the *Svratka River* basin was created, which included the proposal to build a reservoir. The overall design of the dam was completed after World War I in 1924, and it was further refined by a design team in 1926–1927. It received approval from the Ministry of Public Works and underwent water rights proceedings in March 1929. The subsequent delay in construction was caused by necessary modifications based on new insights from the *Vranov Dam* project on the *Dyje River*, which was under construction at the time. Preparatory work began in 1935, and construction commenced in 1936. The waterworks were completed in 1940 (Brázdil, 2020, pp. 80–81; Fasora, 2017, p. 658).

Commencement of the project during a challenging period

The beginning of 1939 for the *Brno* unit was still marked by memories of the successful 10th *All-Sokol Rally* in *Prague* (*Všesokolský slet* in Czech), further enlivened by a *Rally* film and an exhibition of trophies and photographs. Both commemorative events garnered extraordinary interest from the membership. Official unit activities began with a general meeting on February 15, attended by 648 members. At this meeting, awards from the 10th *All-Sokol Rally* were distributed to 187 competitors from the unit, with 54 receiving medals. Elections were also held, although longtime leader *Josef Zezula*, whose 60th anniversary was celebrated with a special event, chose not to participate (*Zpravodaj* 1939, pp. 1–4). The unit reflected on its achievements over the past fifty years during this time. This significant All-Sokol Rally took place almost exactly one month before the German army occupied Bohemia and Moravia, transforming the Czecho-Slovak Republic into two separate entities: the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia under German control, and an independent Slovak state.“

However, the occupation soon had a profound impact on every aspect of life, significantly disrupting the *Sokol* unit's work and daily activities. Despite the political and state upheavals, some physical education activities persisted, albeit under difficult conditions. Initially, exercise sessions were limited to once a week in the *Sokol* stadium's concert hall, but from November 27, 1940, members were able to return to the women's gym, allowing the frequency of sessions to increase to twice a week. Meanwhile, exercise sessions at the school premises on *Babák Square* (now *Náměstí Míru*) continued without interruption (*Zpravodaj* 1940, May 26, p. 8).

From an external perspective, summer camps for youth proceeded almost as usual, with camps for girls in *Bojkovice*, adolescent girls in *Náměšť nad Oslavou* and at the *Vrbinec pond* near *Pozďatín*, and for adolescent boys in *Zubří* near *Nové Město na Moravě*. Additionally, a women's camp was introduced at the *Vrbinec pond*. These camps, which lasted for four weeks, hosted a total of 280 participants. The unit had been organizing such camps since 1920, recognizing their value for both the health and moral development of young people. As noted in the unit's newsletter: „There is nothing more beautiful for boys and girls than holidays spent in the beautiful nature of the forest and by the water, in the rays of the summer sun, and in the company of peers. Days in holiday camps pass quickly between duties and fun, games, swimming, sports, excursions, and serious work, all accompanied by singing and spontaneous joy. After the holidays, the youth return physically and mentally strengthened“ (*Zpravodaj* 1940, May 26, p. 7).

However, *Sokol Brno I* was not the only association aiming to take advantage of the proposed dam. For instance, between 1936 and 1940, *Brno* rowers sought to build a new rowing center. Members of the *Czech Rowing Club Brno* were still determined to settle on the left bank of the dam, approximately 300 meters from the future Complex, in the latter half of 1939, but their ambitious plans were halted by the occupation.

One of the key advantages that enabled *Sokol Brno I* to start construction just before World War II was the vivid memory among its members of the opening of the summer exercise ground and stadium on *Kounicova Street* in 1929. Despite grappling with a 10 million Czechoslovak crown debt, the unit had access to the most modern facility for sports, cultural, and social activities in *Brno*. It is no surprise that the stadium remained the focal point of these activities for many years (*Červená*,

2008, pp. 181–205; Strachová, 2020; Zapletal & Kožík, 1948). This fact attracted new members and enabled the development of other activities as well.

Even during the very difficult wartime period, the filling of the *Brno Reservoir* was finally completed in 1940². In the months immediately following the occupation of the rest of Czech-Slovak Republic in March 1939 by the German army, the realization of this *Sokol* project slowly began, despite the circumstances.

How vision turns into reality.

The history of the Complex, located in the bay of what is now the *Brno Reservoir*, began even before the reservoir itself was constructed. As early as the autumn of 1933, seven years before the reservoir was filled, a group of *Sokol* officials, led by the then-chief of *Sokol Brno I* and later chairman *Josef Zezula*, conducted the first inspection of the land where a sports center could potentially be built. Zezula recognized that the further growth of the unit was „not possible without water,“ understanding that traditional exercise grounds and gymnasiums were no longer sufficient. He saw the need to integrate water sports, camping, and summer camps to keep pace with modern trends (Zpráva, 1939, p. 6; Nešpor, 2009, pp. 18–19; Spěšný, 2014, p. 2; *Sokol*, n.d.).

This vision, later echoed by *Jan Jebavý* (Jebavý, 1940, p. 52), gradually gained acceptance within the entire unit. The members committed to preparing for the opening of the resort and swimming area at the future *Kníničky Reservoir* by training for swimming. The *Sokol* swimming section at that time had access only to the *Lázně Šarlotinky*³ (former *Charlotten Baths*, now *Ponávka Baths*) for winter training, and in the summer, they trained at the city baths in *Zábrdovice*⁴ (Zpravodaj, 1938, pp. 45–46; Žáková, 2022, p. 40; Kroupa & Šeferisová, 2017, p. 1099).

In October 1937, the committee of instructors recommended purchasing a suitable plot of land in the cadastral area of *Kníničky*. The area was acquired from the army, and by early 1938, it was officially registered as the property of *Sokol*. The entire project was designed by *Prof. Ing. Arch. Dr. Techn. Bohumil Babánek*. The ceremonial groundbreaking, following an extensive presentation by construction supervisor *Ing. Josef Ticháček*, was led by *Josef Zezula* on Sunday, May 14, 1939 (Zpráva, 1939, p. 6; Nešpor, 2009, pp. 18–19; Zpravodaj, 1938, February, p. 14; *Sokol*, n.d.).

The land for the *Sokol* facility was shaped like an irregular rectangle, bordered on three sides by the reservoir and on the north by agricultural land. The total area spanned 15 hectares, or 150,000 square meters. In 1939, the entire northern boundary was planted with poplars to protect the future swimming area from the north. Shortly after acquiring the land, the unit began planning the project. A committee was formed by the board to oversee the construction of the *Sokol* Multi-functional Sports Complex as finances allowed. All earthworks were to be completed by the unit's

2 By an extraordinary stroke of luck, the *Brno Reservoir* did not become one of the shortest-lived reservoirs. In 1945, mines were placed beneath the dam, and the occupying army had planned to blow it up during their retreat. However, their plan failed purely by fortunate chance.

3 The baths known as *Charlotten Baths*, named after Charlotte of Belgium, were among the most modern in Austria-Hungary at the end of the 19th century.

4 The municipal baths in *Zábrdovice* were built in 1932 according to a design by famous functionalistic architect Czech Bohuslav Fuchs on the site of older baths from 1882. Fuchs designed the new, functionally modernist baths for both summer and year-round use.

members, similar to the process used in the construction of the stadium. However, the greater distance from *Brno* to the construction site made it impractical to mandate member labor, as had been successfully done in the past. Instead, the committee opted for voluntary labor. Before work began, the unit relocated its shed from the meadow under *Veverí Castle* to *Kníničky*, where it was reassembled near the excavation sites by the bay. The shed served as a storage space for tools and a place to prepare refreshments (Zpravodaj, 1940, March 23, pp. 36–37).

On the southern side of the property stood an old mill, next to a pond fed by a stream from higher ground. During heavy rains a few years ago, the pond's inflow was shut off, causing the stream to bypass it and carve a deep channel. Over time, only the ruined walls of the mill and surrounding houses remained, with the streambanks overgrown by bushes. The walls had to be demolished, and the overgrowth cleared to ensure the intended swimming area lay on a flat base. Initial efforts focused on leveling the terrain, removing the pond embankments, and lowering the muddy bottom of the pond by about two meters. The excavated soil was used to fill the channel carved by the stream. Bush clearing began first, followed by tree felling in September 1939. Several thousand cubic meters of soil were excavated and transported. By autumn, the construction of the pools in the upper corner of the reservoir bay was underway. To ensure stable swimming conditions, the unit decided to build two pools: one for swimmers, measuring 18 by 50 meters with a depth of 1.35 meters, and a smaller pool for non-swimmers (children's pool), measuring 12 by 14 meters with a depth of 40–60 centimeters. The larger pool was also intended for swimming competitions, so the surrounding slopes were terraced accordingly.

The construction of the pools was contracted out to the Brno-based construction company *J. Kozel & B. Kučera*, selected for their lowest bid. The company promptly began preparatory and some concreting work. Work on other parts of the complex was largely based on voluntary labor by members of *Sokol*. Work on the Complex began on May 16, 1939, with the last planned workday of this construction season on December 10, 1939. Over the course of 104 workdays, the highest participation was recorded on June 4, 1939, when 217 members were present. In total, approximately 21,847 hours of labor were contributed in 1939, which was a remarkably high amount of work accomplished given the bleak circumstances of the time. By the end of the year, the shed was moved to a higher location and combined with a newly constructed provisional open shed to create a large hut. The hut, equipped with windows, shutters, a wooden floor, a cooking stove, and covered externally with asphalt paper, provided a place for members to store their clothes, shelter from the rain, and cook and eat meals in peace (Zpravodaj, 1940, March 23, pp. 36–37).

World War II and Its Impact

During the freezing weather of January and February 1940, all work on the Complex naturally came to a standstill. However, whenever conditions allowed, preparations were made to stockpile gravel to ensure that concrete work could resume promptly in early spring. At this time, the only person regularly on-site was the caretaker, who managed the snow-covered area. Despite the halt in physical construction, the committee overseeing the project remained active. They met regularly to develop a detailed schedule to ensure the completion of critical tasks by May 1940, when the reservoir was expected to be fully flooded. Priority was given to finishing the earth excavation, blasting, and rock removal at the site designated for the diving tower.

During the construction season of 1940, many members, unable to participate in the physical labor due to health reasons, supported the project through monetary donations. While none of the internal materials explicitly mention it, it is easy to infer that the unusually high sickness rate among *Sokol* members often served as a formal justification for other reasons stemming from the wartime period. Nevertheless, some members continued to work actively on the construction site. All donations for the Complex's construction were handled through the *National Agricultural Savings Bank* in *Brno* (Zpravodaj, 1940, January 29, p. 3; Zpravodaj, 1940, February 28, p. 24).

To raise awareness among *Sokol* members and promote the project, an exhibition was organized in the small hall of the *Sokol* stadium on *Kounicova*, showcasing the progress of work on the complex. A comprehensive imagined view of the future complex, drawn by *Professor Rudolf Kučera* (see Figure 1), highlighted the vision of the project's leader, *Josef Zezula*. The exhibition also featured various maps, site plans, and a model of the diving tower, offering visitors a thorough understanding of the project's scope (Zpravodaj, 1940, February 28, p. 16).

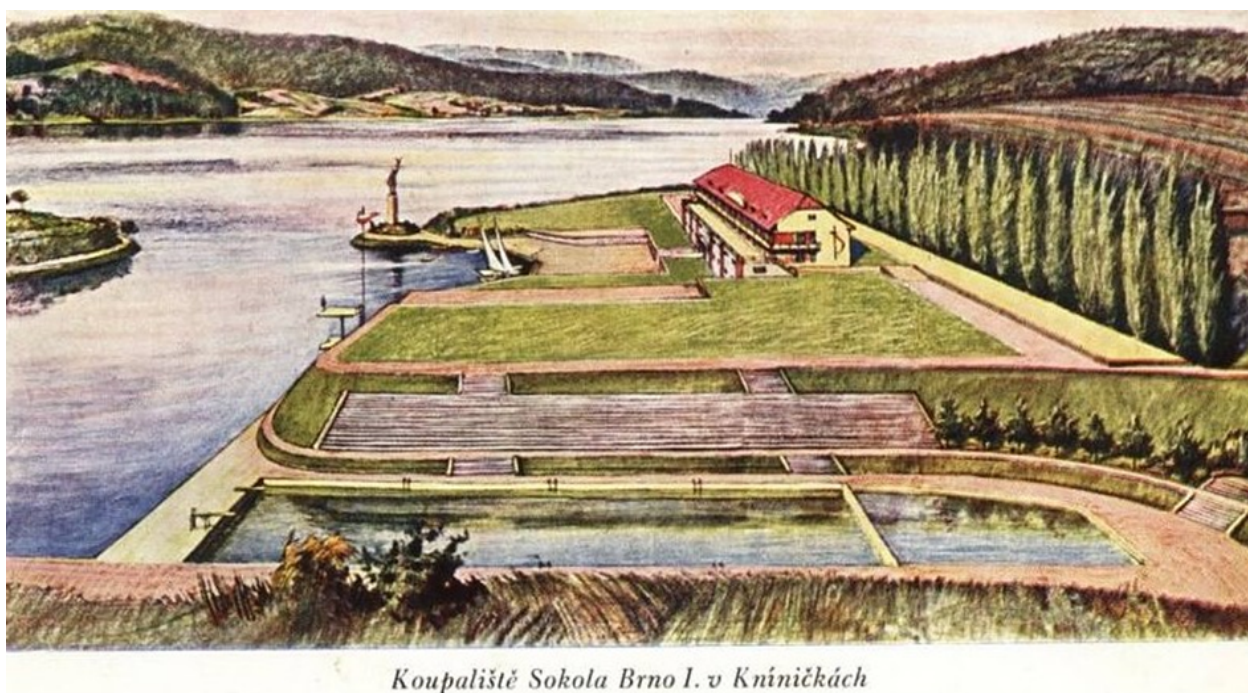


Figure 1. Visionary drawing by R. Kučera, reused on the fundraising postcard in 1940, originally drawn between 1937 and 1939.

Source: Archive of Sokol Brno I



Figure 2. A photograph of an almost identical situation in 2024 allows for a comparison between the original intention and the current state. In the foreground, just behind the road and to the right of the volleyball court fence, the original children's wading pool is still present, visible as a green area, now serving as a protected wetland for amphibians.

Source: Author's archive, photo by Adam Strach

In 1940, despite the intensifying World War II and the continual worsening of living conditions for non-German citizens, work on the Complex resumed on April 14 with the participation of eighty-seven members, and by April 21, the number of participants had even doubled. The construction company *J. Kozel & B. Kučera* began its work on Monday, April 15, 1940, continuing with the concreting of the pools and the installation of part of the drainage channel around the pools. The company employed around forty workers for these tasks (Pernica, 1940, p. 63). The remaining work, as in the previous construction season, was carried out by volunteer labor. The *Sokol Brno I* unit's work motto became „Every Sunday and holiday, everyone to *Kníničky*!“ (Zpravodaj, 1940, March 23, pp. 36–37; Zpravodaj, 1940, April 26, pp. 48–49).

Sokol members, as part of voluntary labor, worked on excavation and soil transport in the upper sections of the land, moving approximately 12,000 cubic meters of soil (the equivalent of 5 Olympic-sized swimming pools). The upper part of the Complex was to be terraced, creating space for sports fields and playgrounds. Grassy areas were designated for sunbathing and camping. A walking path was planned around the perimeter of the property and on the opposite slope, which was rented from the municipality of *Kníničky*, providing a comfortable circuit around the entire Complex, above the highest water level. Once the terrain was modified, the slopes were to be planted with shrubs, trees, and other vegetation. The central building was planned for the middle of the property, with its basement at the dock level, housing boathouses, storage areas, workshops, and showers. The ground floor would feature a restaurant, spacious social rooms, and terraces, while the upper floor was designed to include communal dormitories and private rooms, all equipped with the most modern amenities.

Work also began in the lower meadow with excavation for the diving tower, which involved overcoming both muddy soil and rock. Due to the technical challenges, the excavation was entrusted to a professional firm. Afterward, work commenced on preparing the foundations for the pools, continuing with the removal of soil washed in by spring rains. The concrete pools and their floors were completed, including plastering, although the report notes that a small section remained unfinished. The *Rozdrojovický potok* (Rozdrojovice stream) was diverted through a 100 cm diameter concrete pipe outside the pool area, designed to channel rainwater away. Several drains were installed around the pools to manage surface water.



Figure 3. A historical winter photograph of the complex from around the late 1960s to early 1970s.

Source: Archive of Sokol Brno I



Figure 4. A photograph of an almost identical situation in 2024 allows for a comparison between the previous and the current state. For better orientation, the no longer existing 10-meter diving tower is virtually visualized with a red dashed line in the photograph.

Source: Author's archive, photo by Adam Strach

Plans for the large swimming pool included six competition lanes, with a starting platform measuring 7 meters wide. The finishing platform, to be temporarily constructed from 2.5-meter-wide planks, would be used during competitions. Two diving boards—one at 1 meter and the other at 3 meters above the water level—were to be placed on the starting platform. Access to the pools was to be provided by six ladders located along the sides of the pool. The children's pool, designed to be filled with water from the main pool, featured a separate drain for frequent water changes and steps located in the corner for easy access.

In May, unit members excavated the terrain for the upper areas of the exercise grounds and camping sites, covering approximately 3,200 square meters. Despite weather-related challenges, progress was remarkably swift, with members participating not only on Sundays and holidays but also on weekdays. As construction costs continued to rise, the unit had to once again appeal to its members for financial support for the Complex. The successful construction of the stadium, which years before had received significant financial backing from members, was frequently cited as a positive example. Additionally, a postcard, using a drawing by *R. Kučera* (see Figure 1), priced at one crown, was issued to help fund the project.

The Complex project was overseen by a committee, with *Ing. Jan Kříž*, *Ing. Vitek*, and builder *B. Kučera* supervising all construction work. The significance of the project was highlighted by the committee's regular activity, which met weekly and was expanded on May 16, 1940, to

include a financial department headed by *Eduard Toman*, with *Vojtěch Lenhart* appointed as the unit board's representative. The financial committee was responsible for securing a loan of 150,000 Czechoslovak crowns (equivalent of approximately €270,000 in 2024) from the unit's members. According to *Eduard Toman's* plan, 300 bonds valued at 500 crowns each, bearing 4% interest and repayable at 10% annually, were issued starting on September 1, 1941. This strategy aimed to repay the capital entrusted to the unit for the construction of the first phase of the Complex within ten years (Jebavý, 1940, p. 54). According to a June 1940 report, work was progressing satisfactorily (Pernica, 1940, p. 64).

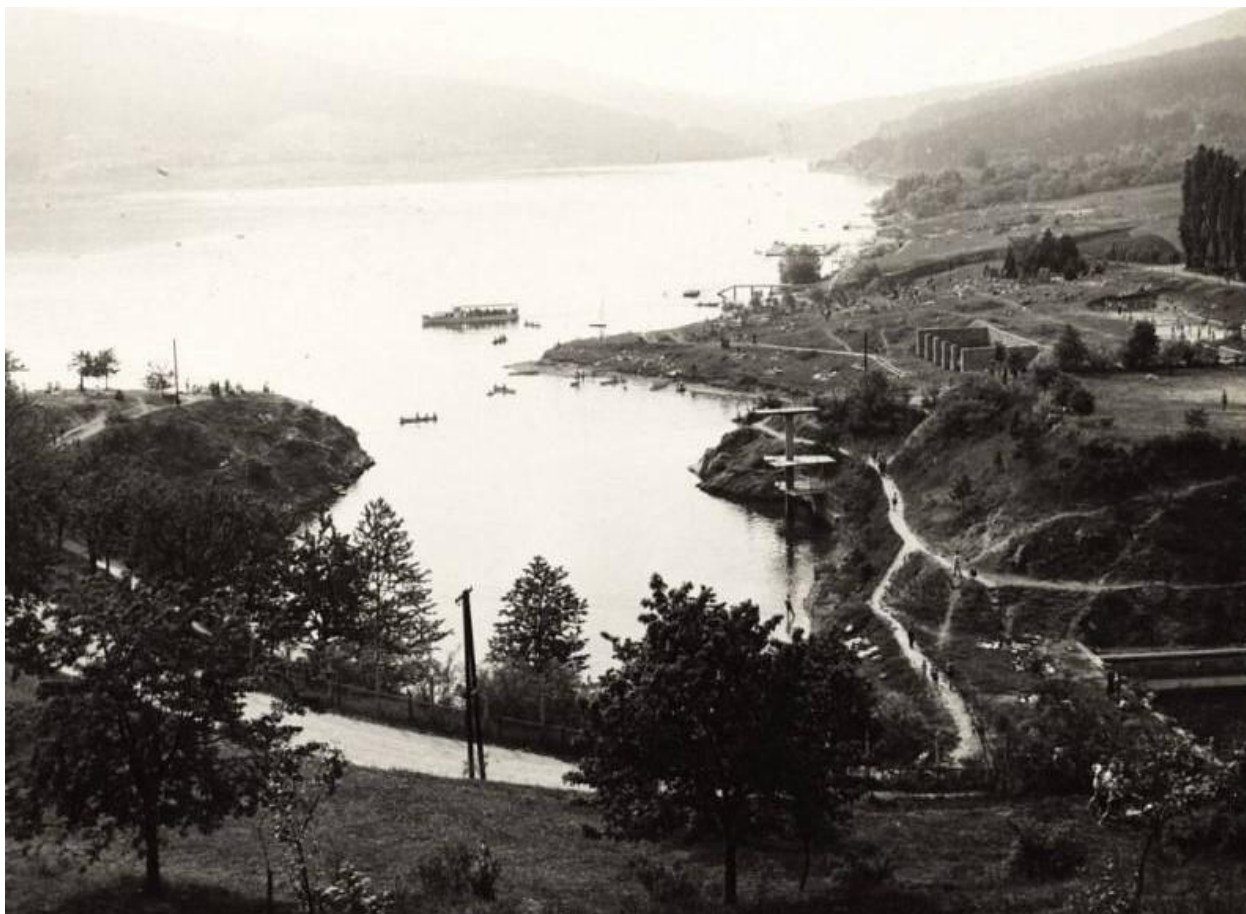


Figure 5. The photograph captures the most intense phase of the complex's construction, sometime between 1940 and 1941.

Source: Archive of Sokol Brno I

However, as member attendance statistics indicate, work in May was slowed by poor weather, while the increasingly unfavorable social and political situation also took its toll. On Sunday, June 9, an extraordinary meeting of the unit's board was held at the construction site, where construction director *Jan Kříž* provided a detailed explanation of the ongoing work during a site tour (Zpravodaj, June 26, 1940, p. 67). With the filling of the *Brno Reservoir*, the landscape surrounding the Complex had transformed dramatically, as noted by the *Sokol* newsletter: „Where is the valley with the white road running through the meadows? Where are the village ruins? In their place, there is water everywhere—bordered by the road on one side, the dam on the left, and the forests of *Obora* in the background“ (Zpravodaj, June 26, 1940, p. 69).

On Sunday, June 16, 1940, the small children's pool was filled with water. This event was met with great enthusiasm by the members: „Despite its intended purpose, it was full of children during the lunch break—those who were over 20 years old“ (Zpravodaj, June 26, 1940, p. 72). Work continued on laying pipes around the pools to divert rainwater and expedite the concreting process. However, in June, the construction company's work was hampered by a labor shortage due to the forced transfer of workers to sectors of the war industry.

In 1940, the construction site was visited by *August Očenášek*⁵, who praised the project as an extraordinary achievement and offered the unit his expertise, gained both at home and abroad. In September, the site was also visited by the president of the Czech *Sokol* movement, *Dr. Jan Keller*, who expressed great appreciation for the approach taken to solve the long-awaited project of the Complex, which held significant importance for the unit.

The praise from the representatives of the Czech *Sokol* movement was a testament to the technical skills of the department, which, ten years after building the stadium in the city center, proposed another significant project, whose full value would be realized after its completion. At the time, particular emphasis was placed on the benefits that the unit's own Complex would bring in the future: „On hot summer days, members will find a pleasant refuge in the cooling waves of the vast lake, easily and cheaply accessible thanks to transportation, far from the relentless rays of the sun, with the possibility of being rocked by playful waves during a motorboat ride, soothing their work-worn nerves with a stay in the nearby forest, all in the pleasant company of fellow members, known from gymnasiums and summer exercise grounds, during games and social entertainment“ (Zpravodaj, September 27, 1940, p. 79).

By the winter of 1940, the concrete floor of the large pool was scheduled for completion, with the perimeter walls already in place. The reinforced concrete diving tower, featuring three platforms for jumps from heights of one, three and a half, and ten meters, was nearly finished, as was the shaft for filling the pools with water from the reservoir. That year, the slopes were also reshaped, and an access road was constructed. The committee overseeing the construction of the Complex was already planning further modifications for 1941. A large area near the *Reservoir*, designated for changing rooms, had been prepared.

The changing room project included essential auxiliary facilities such as a first aid station, a lifeguard room, ticket offices, a buffet, and a kitchen. However, assigning the construction of the central building to a professional firm was not feasible, as it would have significantly increased the project's overall cost. The grand opening of the entire Complex was planned for 1941. Despite these plans, the committee met only twice in September and twice in October, with each department—technical and financial—holding a single meeting.

The committee grew concerned about the lackluster response to the bond issuance campaign, which was intended to raise capital for the construction. As a result, the unit once again called upon members who had not yet made a monetary donation or purchased a bond to do so as soon as possible (Zpravodaj, September 27, 1940, p. 79; Zpravodaj, October 27, 1940, p. 99; Zpravodaj, November 30, 1940, p. 107; Zpravodaj, December 30, 1940, pp. 120–121).

5 A prominent *Sokol* official and physical education inspector during the First Czechoslovak Republic, now retired.

At the beginning of 1941, the Committee for the Construction of the Complex began meeting more frequently, even during periods when work could not proceed. The committee focused on reviewing the work completed so far and preparing a construction plan to ensure the Complex could be opened as scheduled. In this context, a proposal for the construction of changing rooms and associated facilities near the pools was presented. After minor adjustments, the proposal was finalized and prepared for implementation.

In March 1941, when the spring sun drew *Brno* residents on outings from *Komín* through *Bystrc* to *Kníničky*, many were astonished to see the Complex in a place that had been an overgrown area filled with bushes and ruined houses just two years earlier. The unit did not conceal its pride in this transformation, and members eagerly answered questions from curious passersby. That same year, members of the *Babák Square Sokol's branch*, which was celebrating its tenth anniversary, pledged their active assistance in the construction.

However, due to the continually worsening political and economic situation in the occupied country, the unit was forced to scale back its originally extensive construction plans for 1941, limiting the work to terrain modifications and tree planting. Although much of this work was carried out by dedicated members, additional finances were still required. To raise funds, the unit once again turned to its members with a bond issuance campaign, offering several 500-crown bonds and reissuing postcards based on the Complex sketch by *R. Kučera* (see Figure 1). The Complex was also featured in various fundraising collections organized by the unit. Throughout this effort, the unit consistently emphasized the self-help nature of the project, as direct financial support was already at this time unthinkable given the severe economic constraints which were imposed by the German occupation administration.

In April 1941, all work at the site was halted when *Sokol's* activities were forcibly ceased to exist. The unit was dissolved, and in July of that year, the Nazis confiscated *Sokol's* property (Zpravodaj, January 30, 1941, p. 8; Zpravodaj, March 28, 1941, pp. 31–32; Nešpor, 2009, p. 18; Zpráva, 1945, p. 2).

In the following wartime months and years, the vast forested area around the reservoir, dotted with both legal and illegal cottages and campsites, became a site for fragmented resistance activities linked to *Bystrc* and *Brno*. However, these resistance efforts did not achieve significant success (Uhlíř, 2002, 2008; Zemánková & Popelka, 2016; Kopečný, 2006; Mitáček & Vykoupil, 2008).

The Post-War Period and Resumption of Activities (1945–1989)

Only after the liberation of *Brno* at the end of April 1945 could the first meeting of the re-established *Sokol* board take place. This occurred very soon, on May 31, 1945, under the leadership of the renowned Czech prose writer *František Kožík*⁶. The meeting was filled with joy over the liberation and sorrow over the many victims of the occupation. The *Brno* city council was informed about the unit's re-establishment as early as May 15, and the announcement was officially confirmed by a decree dated November 30, 1945, no. 20288/2-6/1945. Along with resuming activities, the unit requested compensation from the national committee for the destroyed exercise equipment,

6 František Kožík (1909–1997) was a prominent Czech writer, best known for his historical novels, plays, and biographies. He is particularly famous for his novel *Největší z pierotů* („The Greatest of the Pierrots“). Kožík was also a key figure in the Czech cultural scene during the 20th century, actively involved in the *Sokol* movement and contributing to both literary and public life in Czechoslovakia.

which was to be replaced with items confiscated from the German *Turnhalle*. The unit also restored the administration of the Complex and secured permission to use the gym at *Babák Square*. The leadership of the unit, proud of *Sokol's* values, sought to verify the behavior of its members during the occupation. For this purpose, a „cleansing commission“ was established, tasked with reviewing membership records and evaluating members' conduct during the occupation. The commission initially operated through a questionnaire survey. The year concluded with a commemorative event on December 16, reflecting on the lost lives. The losses continued, as many members succumbed to the consequences of imprisonment, torture, or other war hardships, including the active social organizer, resistance fighter, and Olympian *Jan Gajdoš* († November 19, 1945), who died shortly after the end of the war as a result of his suffering (Zpráva, 1947, p. 7).

Despite being a regular topic at every construction committee meeting, the unfinished Complex could not receive the necessary attention in 1945 due to the urgent need to restore the war-damaged *Sokol* stadium on *Kounicova Street*. Lacking both financial and human resources, the committee had to revise the original construction plan in light of changed circumstances. Under the leadership of *Stanislav Mareš*, a team of *Sokol's* instructors took charge of the work on the Complex.

Construction of the Complex resumed on April 20, 1946, with an on-site meeting to discuss all planned modifications for the year, including key issues related to specific parts of the land. Member-driven work began on April 27, marked by a ceremonial first excavation by Mayor *Josef Zezula*, bringing the construction site back to life. Teams of three members each aimed to dig, load, and transport sixty wheelbarrows of soil over a distance of approximately eighty meters daily. Work continued every Sunday, holiday, and even on Saturday afternoons until late autumn.

By the end of the 1946 construction season, members were satisfied with their contributions, having constructed a concrete boathouse and two wooden buildings, which awaited interior finishing and would serve the unit for many years. Additionally, the largest sports field was completed in the spring.

Due to low member participation, it was impossible to complete all the planned tasks on schedule. Consequently, the planned small extension into the lake, where the unit intended to erect a monument likely dedicated to the Czechoslovak Legionnaires in honor of their fight for Czechoslovakia's independence during World War I⁷, could not be realized despite favorable low water levels in the reservoir. This plan ultimately failed. Additionally, essential tasks such as laying water pipelines, erecting fencing, repairing the large pool, and completing the landscaping of the entire property were left unfinished.

These shortcomings were largely attributed to the challenging post-war conditions that affected the entire country. Although the revived Czech *Sokol* movement had around 6,924 members in 1947, only 4,809 actively participated in exercises and other activities (Tyrš, 1947, pp. 33–34; Zpráva, 1948, pp. 19–21, 118). For *Sokol Brno I* alone, the financial burden of restoring damaged property was significant. The specific costs for *Sokol Brno I* in 1947 were, for example, 6,003,932 Czechoslovak crowns (€3,1 million in 2024) for the restoration of the Kounicova Stadium, 312,460

⁷ The probable dedication of the monument to the Legionnaires is just a well-founded assumption. No document explicitly mentioning this intention has been found. However, it is a likelihood bordering on certainty, given the ideological focus and traditions of *Sokol*. It is likely that the evidence was lost during the occupation.

crowns (€13,019 in 2024) for the summer exercise grounds, and 470,821 crowns (€19,618 in 2024) for the Complex. The priority was, of course, the restoration of the *Sokol* stadium and summer exercise grounds, leaving the Complex sidelined in terms of funding.

In 1947, work on the Complex stalled due to various obstacles, including shortages of cement, labor, and the limited availability of construction firms, largely as a result of post-war scarcity and the need to prioritize more urgent public and private projects. Member participation was also significantly lower than in previous years. Only a small group of members regularly contributed, while others either avoided the work entirely or made only brief appearances. Despite these challenges, some progress was made that year in the Complex construction. A wooden building was constructed, with concrete cellars underneath, as well as a boathouse that included a workshop and a cellar for the buffet. A concrete foundation was laid under the non-cellar part of the structure, and a covered porch was added, facing the reservoir to provide shade on hot days. The building was completed with a roof, and broken windows were glazed and fitted with metal fixtures.

In the historical context, we must not forget that by 1947, the post-war euphoria had already been replaced by a harsh reality, accompanied by significant political turbulence and economic crises, which were merely a prelude to another regime change, once again unfavorable to the *Sokol* movement. As a result of the post-war situation combined with a severe drought, there was also a shortage of food, making sports almost an unimaginable luxury. This nervous atmosphere affected everything and undoubtedly diminished the members’ motivation to build, as they vividly remembered the previous wartime oppression.

In total, 33 workdays were recorded at the Complex in 1947, with 1,423 participants—1,178 men and boys, and 245 women and girls. The men and boys worked 4,462 hours, while the women and girls contributed 921 hours, for a total of 5,383 hours. A significant development was the *Sokol* board’s proposal to introduce a work obligation for members, applicable both at the Complex and in the restoration and expansion of the stadium in *Tyrš’s Orchard* (Zápis, 1948; Zpráva, 1947, p. 119; Zpráva, 1948, pp. 54–55; Kučera, 1948, p. 49).

	Volunteer Presence		Total Labour Hours		Labour Hours per Person	
Year	1940	1947	1940	1947	1940	1947
Men and Junior Men	2 224	1 178	10 534	4 462	4,7	3,8
Women and Junior Women	885	245	3 883	921	4,4	3,8
Guests	21	0	80	0	3,8	0
Total	3 130	1 423	14 497	5 383	4,6	3,8

Table 1. A comparison of Sokol members’ interest in volunteer work on the Complex between 1940 and 1947 reveals a significant decline across all three monitored parameters, despite the introduction of mandatory labor for members in 1947.

Source: Own processing

In addition to the growing problems with the construction of the Complex, operational issues with the already existing facilities also arose. Members’ interest in both swimming pools gradually

declined, largely because the *Rozdrojovice stream*, which fed the pools, made the water too cold for extended swimming. The situation was further aggravated by the rocky bottom of the pools, which, despite efforts to reinforce it with concrete during the war years, saw little improvement. Another issue involved the platform diving tower, as the natural fluctuation of the water level in the *Brno Reservoir* made the 10-meter platform potentially deadly during low water periods. Moreover, the fluctuation of the water level caused the diving tower to be theoretically ten meters high, but depending on the current water level, it could also be nine meters or, in extreme cases, thirteen meters, making it especially unpredictable for divers. As the future would show, the tower also had other safety concerns.

In 1948, ambitious plans were developed to improve the Complex. These included constructing partitions and dormitories, installing toilets with appropriate sedimentation and filtration tanks, setting up electrical wiring, and implementing an expensive water supply system and kitchen facilities to once again prepare meals for the working members. The plan also called for fencing the entire property and planting shrubs and trees, following a design by the municipal garden administration (*Zpráva*, 1948, p. 116). Unfortunately, none of these plans were realized due to the growing political and economic pressures following the February Communist coup in 1948.

Sokol had long aimed to unify most of the physical education and sports activities in the Czech lands under its organization, believing that only through such centralization could these activities properly develop. This goal seemed more attainable after the February coup in 1948, when a communist government was established in Czechoslovakia. Under the slogan „Everyone to *Sokol*,“ a law on the new organization of physical education and sport was adopted. This law brought about the centralization and state control of physical education activities across the country, leading to unified management.

However, instead of strengthening *Sokol* as its leaders had envisioned, the organization gradually merged into state-controlled physical education structures, losing its autonomy and original significance. A *Sokol* unit was established at the *Zbrojovka Brno*⁸ factory, but it was now under the control of communists and trade unions. In mid-March 1951, a joint meeting of members from *Zbrojovka Brno* and *Sokol Brno I* took place. The meeting was held in a tense political atmosphere, and the merger of the two units was approved, largely thanks to the 150 apprentices from *Zbrojovka* who were invited to vote. This merger was reflected not only in the new name, *Sokol Zbrojovka Brno I*, but also in changes to leadership and the formation of a new committee.

In November 1952, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and the government issued a resolution on measures for the development of physical education and sport, which introduced a unified, state-controlled physical education system and established an organizational structure for its implementation. With Act No. 71 *Sb.*, dated December 12, 1952, the natural development of the *Sokol* organization was interrupted (Strachová, 2015, pp. 46–59).

8 Back In the 1930s, the *Zbrojovka Brno* factory was one of Czechoslovakia's largest and most important arms manufacturers. Under occupation during World War II, shifting its focus primarily to arms production for the German military. After the war, the factory fell under state control as Czechoslovakia underwent nationalization, and it continued to produce firearms, machinery, and vehicles as part of the country's post-war reconstruction efforts.

The new law, effective from January 1953, placed the management of physical education under the control of the trade unions of the *Revolutionary Trade Union Movement*. *Zbrojovka* was renamed to *Tělovýchovná jednota Spartak Závodů Jana Švermy*, after a hero of the Slovak National Uprising at the end of World War II. The still-unfinished Complex, which had lost its profitability, became a refuge for former *Sokol* members during the communist regime. The Complex, now typically referred to by its shorter name *Sokolák*, continued to attract young people, former *Sokol* camp participants, young gymnasts, and athletes. They were united by shared ideals and a collective indignation over the fact that *Zbrojovka* used the Complex several times for training *People's Militia* units.

The unfinished structure fell into disrepair, and the committee of *TJ Spartak ZJŠ* sought individuals who could at least partially care for the Complex. Eventually, several volunteers were found within the tourism department of *TJ Spartak ZJŠ*, which included some former *Junák* (scouting) officials. *Miroslav Králík* and *Ing. Hána* were appointed to oversee the maintenance, while members of the youth section, led by *Jan Dopita*, carried out upkeep. The garages were managed by former scouts *Josef Feit* and *Ferda Hloušek* (Nešpor, 2009, pp. 19–20; Fajkusová, n.d.).

These hasty changes not only halted the realization of many of *Sokol's* original plans but also disrupted the natural development of an organization that had played a crucial role in fostering physical fitness and national awareness in Czechoslovakia for decades. Once a key force in the development of sport and physical education, *Sokol* gradually lost its influence, replaced by a centralized system more aligned with the political goals of the communist regime than with *Sokol's* original ideals.

Several modifications were made to the Complex over time. The area had to be fenced off to limit access to the wooden cabin and boathouse. The wooden perimeter walls were replaced with masonry blocks—installed without building permits—and then fitted with new windows and covered in white plaster. The cabin received a new metal roof, and the boathouse was completed and handed over to the canoeing section.

Part of the original vision for the Complex by the reservoir began to take shape in the spring of 1959, when a group of former canoeists recognized the need for proper organizational activities and established a canoeing section as part of the unit's tourism department.

In connection with the events of the so-called *Prague Spring*⁹ in the years 1968 and 1969, efforts were made to address injustices faced by former *Sokol* members. The *TJ Spartak ZJŠ* committee engaged in discussions with the *Sokol* preparatory committee about reinstating several dozen former members. However, these efforts garnered little interest and were ultimately rejected. Partial success came only from the tourism department committee, which, at the initiative of the canoeing section in January 1969, issued an open letter to other unit members, advocating for the restoration of the unit's pre-1951 name, *Sokol Zbrojovka Brno*, or alternatively, the historic name *Sokol Brno I*. Despite significant support from many members, the name „Sokol“ could not be restored, and the unit was eventually renamed *Tělovýchovná jednota Zbrojovka Brno* (*Sports Union Zbrojovka Brno*).

9 The *Prague Spring* of 1968 was a period of political liberalization in Czechoslovakia aimed at reforming the communist system. It was crushed by a Soviet-led invasion in August 1968, ending the brief push for freedom and democracy.

In the 1980s, sand that had been brought in for local construction projects remained on the shore, accidentally forming the only small sandy beach on the reservoir. Throughout this period, the tourism department and canoeing section continued to maintain and repair the boathouse and cabin. These activities were often conducted as part of fulfilling socialist commitments, a common practice at the time that continued until the *Velvet Revolution*¹⁰.

By the late 1980s, during the final years of the communist era, the Complex was largely in a deplorable state. Both pools were completely non-functional, having turned into natural, marshy areas overgrown with reeds, serving as a playground for small fish and numerous amphibians. The diving tower was in a critical state of disrepair, with all original safety features and ladders missing, making it life-threatening. This danger was compounded by fluctuating water levels in the reservoir; at low water levels, diving from the ten-meter platform was even potentially fatal. The increased number of serious injuries, including fatal ones, led to the intentional gradual demolition of the tower in the second half of the 1980s for safety reasons by the municipal authority. First, the upper ten-meter platform was dismantled, and a few years later, the remaining two lower platforms were also demolished. The rest of the Complex's facilities were in similarly poor condition, with a few exceptions, such as the canoe garage and the buffet, which remained functional, though relatively underutilized.

Restoration of the Complex after Velvet revolution in 1989

After the *Velvet Revolution* in November 1989, organizations and associations like *Sokol*, which had been forcibly dissolved after 1948, gradually began to revive their activities. A nationwide meeting of former officials and representatives of *Sokol* units and districts (*župa* in Czech) was swiftly organized in *Prague* on January 7, 1990. In *Brno*, a *Sokol* general meeting was held at the *Reduta Theater* on Saturday, January 27, 1990, where a new committee, led by *JUDr. Zdeněk Ostrý*, was elected. The founding meeting of *Sokol Brno I* was convened by *MUDr. Jiří Hlavoň* on March 2, 1990. Among the newly registered members was the canoeing section, led by *Ing. Vladimír Pásek*. Regular sport activity sessions resumed as early as September of that year. On June 1, 1990, Act No. 173/1990 Coll. came into effect, mandating the return of property to *Sokol* and other organizations.

At the general meeting on March 27, 1991, a new committee for *Sokol Brno I* was elected, and on April 1, they assumed management of the sports facilities on *Kounicova Street* and the Complex. However, the facilities were handed over in a severely damaged and looted condition, placing a significant burden on the canoeing section and the entire unit. In 1992, the committee entered into a lease agreement with businessman *Jan Cibulka*. For several years, the Complex officially operated as a restaurant but, in reality, functioned as a nightclub. Due to breaches of the contractual terms, a prolonged dispute arose, accompanied by internal disagreements between the canoeing section and the *Sokol Brno I* committee. This conflict was only resolved in 1995.

In 1998, *Sokol* decided to open the Complex to the public and focus its sports activities on beach volleyball. The first court was established in 1999, and since then, top-level tournaments have been held regularly (Nešpor, 2009, pp. 22–24; Fajkusová, n.d.). The area has since become a popular

10 The *Velvet Revolution* was a peaceful uprising in Czechoslovakia in November and December 1989, which led to the fall of the communist regime. It was marked by mass protests and demonstrations, culminating in the transition to a democratic government without violence.

destination for athletes and the general public, offering ideal conditions for active leisure. Through gradual development and the successful integration of beach volleyball, the Complex has evolved into an important sports and social hub that promotes a healthy lifestyle.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the key values that shaped not only *Sokol's* approach to physical education but also the identity of the young Czechoslovak state. It underscores *Sokol's* courage to embark on long-term projects, even when burdened with debt from the construction of the *Sokol Stadium* on *Kounicova Street*. The study also emphasizes the determination to achieve goals despite obstacles and adverse conditions, the ability to strategically plan for future needs, and the firm belief in the importance of *Sokol's* physical education for a democratic society.

The main driving force behind the idea of building the Complex within *Sokol Brno I* was *Josef Zezula*, who recognized the potential of the waterworks on the *Svratka River* and refused to succumb to the pressures of the time. As *Sokol* historiography confirms, under his leadership, *Sokol* ideals took deep root in the Brno unit, leading to its extraordinary success. The idea to utilize the area near the newly built waterworks emerged in the early 1930s. In the pivotal year of 1932, the unit managed to acquire the desired land. Construction of the *Sokol Sports Complex* began during the Nazi occupation, with *Sokol* brigades initiating the work. However, these efforts were forcibly interrupted in April 1941 when the Nazis dissolved the unit and confiscated all *Sokol* property. Construction could only resume after 1945, with progress stabilizing by 1946.

Many of the now elderly members still recall the period when they would walk from the tram stop in *Žabovřesky* to the dam to spend their free time building their own sports and recreational complex. Most often, they worked on Sundays and holidays when they had time for association activities. Members of *Sokol Brno I* carried out extensive terrain modifications, built two concrete pools, a wooden cabin with a terrace, a sun terrace in front of the garages, foundations for a large boathouse, a beach volleyball court, and landscaped the area by planting poplars and a birch grove. However, this progress was disrupted by the rise of the totalitarian regime and the subsequent merger with the *Zbrojovka* unit, marking a dark era in *Sokol's* history for many. Despite the post-war challenges and declining interest in the Complex, it became a refuge for former members who could gather there relatively undisturbed.

After the *Velvet Revolution* in November 1989, the Complex faced prolonged disputes that weren't resolved until the mid-1990s. The area underwent many transformations—from the days when steamboat passengers watched *Sokol* members exercising on the grassy meadow, through a period when frogs inhabited the abandoned pool, to its current state, where the Complex is once again open to the public and offers quality facilities for athletes. Today, the site features a functioning boathouse, a restaurant, simple tourist accommodations, tennis courts, a beach, and beach volleyball courts. The grassy beach provides a relaxing atmosphere, and the nearby large parking lot makes it easily accessible. One of the Complex's key advantages is its peaceful location, free from the noise of nearby roads, unlike the other shore of the reservoir.

It is hard to overlook a certain historical irony, as most of the original plans for the Complex never materialized as its founders envisioned. There is no monument, statue, artificial peninsula, or intended yacht harbor. The Complex is not widely used for water sports, except for limited activities in canoeing and paddleboarding, and there are no camping activities or calisthenics, all of which were originally intended to be the main features. For the most important planned sports activities—swimming and platform diving—it turned out that, despite all the builders' efforts, the Complex had significant conceptual or functional shortcomings, or even direct safety risks. As a result, this intended use of the Complex was significantly limited. The younger generation has no idea why the area is still sometimes traditionally called the „Sokol swimming pool,” as there is no trace left of the original pools. In their exact place, four beach volleyball courts have been built. Only the stands by the courts maintain the original layout, and they are the same stands from which spectators once watched swimming competitions. Today, from these identical stands, they watch beach volleyball matches. Nevertheless, the area is ultimately being used for sports activities, albeit of a different kind than originally planned.

Currently (2024), the *Brno Reservoir* area is undergoing another wave of intense construction development, comparable to similar situations in the 1930s and 1970s, though now on an even larger scale. An unintended consequence of this development is, of course, the inevitable worsening of conditions for suburban recreation and nature-based sports in many respects. In this situation, the traditional Complex area has become a kind of sports oasis, where the community spirit and the original idea of integrating sports with nature are still successfully maintained. In this sense, this local landmark can be seen as a successful culmination of efforts to provide such a base for Brno's sports community.

In conclusion, as the author of this article, I would like to share my personal impression that I personally gained from this small historical lesson. It is a conclusion that is ambiguous but nevertheless quite optimistic. On the one hand, it clearly shows that purposeful collective effort can overcome even unexpectedly large obstacles and bring results. At the same time, however, it also holds true that the outcome may end up being very far from the original intentions. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that the result is inherently bad. From this perspective, this small historical study can also be understood as an instructive case study for today's proponents of similar initiatives.

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