



Knights of Malta in the Czech Lands

Milan Buben, České velkopřevorství řádu maltézských rytířů v dějinách [The Grand Priory of Bohemia of the Order of Malta in History], Prague: Libri, 2018. 182 p.

The Order of Malta (also known as the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, Johannites) ranks among the most remarkable institutions ever formed within the Catholic Church, and the beginnings of its activities in the territory of the Czech Lands date back to the 12th century. Despite this, surprisingly little space is devoted to its history in the Czech academic milieu. An exception is made by the research and literary activities of the historian, heraldist and lecturer at the Charles University — Knight of Magistral Grace of the Order of Malta — Milan Buben with his book *The Grand Priory of Bohemia of the Order of Malta in History* (1st ed., 182 pages), published in 2018 by Libri in Prague.

Since the beginning, it must be stated that the book does not bring any fundamental new information. It also draws from the primary sources only to a limited extent. On the other hand, it is significant for its summarization of the to date Czech literary production on the topic on a relatively limited space. It is also very readable, sympathetic, albeit in a slightly archaic style, which is also typical of the author's other publications. Milan Buben outlines the story of the Knights of the Order of St. John in the Czech Lands since their arrival in the 12th century to the present. The book is written essentially in the form of a chronicle; events are ordered mostly chronologically, although when it is necessary, the author does not hesitate to step out of the strictly chronological line. He does it for example when describing the life stories of important personalities of the Order. It is also somewhat surprising that although the book is not divided in any chapters, the whole story is presented in a coherent way. The structure is logical, as it is a follow-up of the line of individual Superiors of the Order in the Czech Lands. The history of the Grand Priory is depicted as a description of events that happened under their ruling.

The book begins with the circumstances of the arrival of the Order to the Czech Lands and a description of the land ownership that the Knights had in the Middle Ages. Most of these assets were acquired by the Order in the 12th century. The greatest attention is given to the later most important manor of the Order in Bohemia, in Strakonice. The author marginally outlines a part of the history of the noble family Bavor of Strakonice, who brought the Knights to this territory at the beginning of the 13th century, and from whom the Order received a number of endowments in the subsequent centuries. At the same time, other important events from the history of the Order are depicted, such as the fact that a meeting between King Wenceslas IV and Archbishop Jan of Jenštejn took place in the Order's Commandery in Prague, as it was the neutral territory, after which, however, the vicar-general, John of Nepomuk (later canonized) was tortured to death.

In particular, during the Hussite wars, the Order suffered substantial economic losses. The Grand Priory of Bohemia's property holdings settled only from the 17th and 18th century. After the founding of the Czechoslovak Republic, the Order was ma-

terially affected by a land reform. This, together with the dire financial situation in which the Grand Priory of Bohemia and Austria found itself due to the extraordinary expenses during the First World War, forced the Knights to proceed to the sale of their lands. The author devotes a separate space to each large estate that was sold. By contrast, the subsequent purchase of the Ligist estate in Styria and the Dohé estate in Subcarpathian Russia is mentioned only in passing.

The publication is not only devoted to the property issues of the Order of Malta in the Czech Lands. It also notes the destinies of its prominent knights and priests, lists the examples of the cultural contributions of the Order (in terms of patronage in the creation of important works of art, construction activities or the building of the Order's library) and last but not least, it describes its humanitarian and charitable activities undertaken throughout its existence. Indeed, as the author recalls, "recognizing the merits of the sufferings of humanity, Emperor Franz Joseph I issued an Imperial Charter in Vienna on 2 April 1881 the Austrian Prince's title to the Grand Prior of Bohemia and Austria and its successors" (pp. 115–116). Undoubtedly the most important humanitarian enterprise undertaken by the Grand Priory in the 19th and in the 20th century was the operation of 8 ambulance trains, which transported during the First World War nearly 360,000 wounded persons from the battlefields to hospitals in the hinterland.

The operation of ambulance trains during the First World War was the high point of the activities of the Grand Priory. After that it suffered significant losses — on the property (especially during the First Republic) as on the prestige. A relatively significant space in the book is devoted to the highly controversial personality of Frā Franz Werner Bobe, O. Melit. He was sentenced to death in 1947 by an Extraordinary People's Court in Prague for collaboration with the Nazis, which had led to the death of four people, and for other crimes. The execution of Frā Bobe was carried out on the day of the judgment. Since the life and influence of this cleric from the Order of Malta have not yet been subjected to a consistent historical inquiry, the author refrains from any judgement. On the one hand, he lists the crimes for which Bobe was sentenced to death, but he also points out that Bobe never pleaded guilty to most of them and warns against the court's bias and the unreliability of the witnesses. He rejects emphatically the idea that the collaborationist activity of Frā Bobe should be generalised to the entire activities of the Grand Priory during the Second World War (as is indeed often the case). In fact, only two of the fourteen Order priests collaborated with the Nazis, while four of them were persecuted during the war.

Some other members of the Order were persecuted also after the February 1948 establishment of the communist dictatorship. The communists severely suppressed the activities of the Order in Czechoslovakia, seized its property, and the Grand Priory could only carry on thanks to members living in exile. The fate of the Grand Priory in the second half of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century is outlined in the book rather schematically. For example, the reader will not know the reason for the appeal of Grand Prior Paar in 2011. Very limited space is devoted to the current fulfilment of the Order's mission, i.e. assistance to the needy, in connection with the introduction of the non-profit organization of Maltéžská pomoc, o.p.s. (whose founder is the Grand Priory of Bohemia), and there is no mention of an issue of current concern, the church property restitution.





From the review it is evident that the publication is not intended to bring about any major discoveries. It neither seeks to be a completely exhaustive source of information about the history of the Grand Priory of Bohemia of the Sovereign Order of Malta. On the contrary, the book can be considered as a so-far lacking overview of the history of Grand Priory of Bohemia. To provide a comprehensive picture of this history, it does not specialise in a particular area of historiography, but contains elements of both economic and social history, as well as the cultural, and the political notions. The book is based on the crossing of these disciplines, therefore it can serve to create a basic idea of the history of the Knights of Malta in the Czech Lands. It also helps to understand the significance of their existence and the extent of their activities. The book can serve as an ideal introduction to the history of the Grand Priory. It can greatly facilitate the work of anyone who would like to explore deeper its history.

In short, the book is an inventory of information from the history of Grand Priory of Bohemia, which its author — probably the greatest expert on the history of the Czech Great Priory — considered the most important, while maintaining maximum objectivity. The readable form of the book, as well as a list of the Grand Priory representatives, the author's indisputable expertise, a pictorial supplement and, a long list of the bibliography (for obvious reasons, the vast majority in Czech) and an annexed index makes a book suitable as for readers from the public, who just want to learn basic information about this remarkable institution, as for researchers who will use it in their professional work. In this context, it can be added that the book contains footnotes, a list of sources and literature, and generally meets all the formalities required by the standard scholar work.

Martin Pola