

NOTES ON RECENT ACCESS TO CZECH ARCHIVES

The recent experience of historians working in Czechoslovakia is that in the archives, as elsewhere in the country, glasnost appears to be alive and well. Wide-ranging access – permission to use archives was denied only at the Archiv ústředního výboru KSČ – would not be particularly noteworthy if not for the well-known problems of the past for research on post – 1918 topics. Not since access was limited in the wake of the Prague Spring has archival material been so readily available to students of contemporary Czechoslovak history.

At present, there seem to be only two barriers to working in Czech archives. Firstly, there is a 50-year closure rule, although this is not always strictly observed. In addition, archivists are not obliged to provide researchers with material from uncatalogued deposits. And, a great deal of material has yet to be catalogued. Both problems can sometimes be circumvented, however, by patience and persistence.

The first step toward using archives in Czechoslovakia is a letter to the proper authorities, written well ahead of time and preferably in Czech, citing the archives, and if possible, the collections, one wants to use. Official affiliation is useful but not essential: the host organization can provide an accompanying request to the archival system. The most comprehensive source for the archives of the Czech lands is *Přehled archivů ČSR* (Prague, 1984), which contains lists of collections as well as addresses.

The Archivní správa in the Ministry of the Interior is the source for access to the Státní oblastní archivy, including Státní ústřední archiv [SÚA] in Prague. The last-named is probably the most important archive in the Czech lands, although many useful

sources for Czechoslovak history are to be found elsewhere. Six archives independent of the state system also contain valuable holdings for the political historian: Archiv Federálního ministerstva zahraničních věcí, Archiv Federálního shromáždění ČSSR, Archiv Kanceláře prezidenta ČSSR, Archiv Národního muzea, Archiv Ústavu marxismu-leninismu ústředního výboru KSČ [AÚML ÚV KSČ], and Vojenský historický archiv (VHA).

Access to Archiv Kanceláře prezidenta ČSSR, one of the most important archives for political historians of Czechoslovakia, is heavily restricted. Permission to use this archive takes a long time and researchers can not necessarily use the finding aids. The files in *Tajné spisy*, which are sometimes available to researchers, contain much useful material on politicians and politics of the First Czechoslovak Republic.

It is easier to gain access to Archiv Národního muzea, under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture, than to archives under other organizations. Holdings – often uncatalogued – include the *pozůstalost* of Czechoslovak Agrarian Party chairman Antonín Švehla and Czechoslovak National Democratic politicians Karel Kramář, Alois Rašín, and Přemysl Šámal. The personal papers of other interwar political personalities can also be found here, among them: Edvard Beneš, Cyril Dušek, Antonín Hajn, Jan Herban.

Archiv Ústavu marxismu-leninismu ÚV KSČ contains among its holdings the Benešův archiv and the Masarykův archiv. Unfortunately, neither is catalogued, with the exception of Masaryk's correspondence.

Among the independent archives in Prague are Archiv Státní banky československé and Archiv Státního židovského muzea. The former, to which there is increasing access, contains the records of various banks, including Živnostenská banka. The cataloguing in the archive has been well done. Access to the Jewish Museum is open, but most archival materials are stored outside Prague and pickups are infrequent. The twentieth-century holdings are fragmentary; the collections for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries appear to be more complete. Many interwar records for the Prague Jewish community are, in any case, housed in Archiv hlavního města Prahy. As regards the independent archives, with exception of the Vojenský historický archiv, one simply writes directly to the archive for permission to use its holdings. In the case of the VHA, applications should go to the Ministry of Interior, but not to Archivní správa.

As concerns district and municipal archives, which are subordinated to the local Národní výbory, applications should be made directly to the archive in question. Okresní archiv Cheb, Okresní archiv Jihlava, Okresní archiv Kutná Hora, Okresní archiv Liberec, and Archiv města Plzně have recently been used by westerners. These archives are particularly useful for local history.

Access to material in the Czech archives at this point appears to be predominantly limited by the willingness of the individual to contact the various archives, archivists, and relevant ministries, as well as to follow up, sometimes more than once, with letters. Time constraints and bureaucratic red tape seem to be the major barriers.