

Municipal Flags in Bohemia.

Aleš Brožek

I believe that those who have ever visited Czechoslovakia will agree with me when I say that our country does not belong among such flag-rich countries as West Germany or the Netherlands. Nevertheless, we have a strong flag study society. It is called the Prague Vexillological Club and has been uniting both Czechoslovak flag scholars, and collectors for 13 years.

Since its very beginning our Club has promoted an interest not only in the history of the Czechoslovak State Flag but also in the municipal -- flags of our country. One of its first projects was therefore undertaken with the aim of the collecting data both on historic and contemporary municipal flags in use in the territory of Bohemia, Moravia, and Slovakia.

We mailed about a thousand letters to nearly all district and municipal museums, archives and administrations asking them to inform us whether municipal flags were or are flown there. Their replies should include either a description of the flag, or a drawing in the case of a more complicated flag pattern, data on colour symbolism and flag usage, and bibliographic references. It was sometimes necessary to send a second or third query before we received a reply. The quality of replies varied. We sometimes got a negative answer from an administration and an affirmative -- one from a museum or archives in the same town.

Data obtained from the replies were compiled by Dr. Ludvik Mucha, chairman of the Prague Vexillological Club. He also incorporated in them the information provided by Jan Miller of Warsaw, one of the world's experts in municipal vexillology, as well as by some members of Prague Vexillological Club. Further data were excerpted from Dr. Mattern's "Flaggenmittlungen". A very valuable source were files of the State Central Archives in Prague that kept replies to a questionnaire concerning municipal symbols in Bohemia collected in 1942.

Subsequently, Dr. Ludvik Mucha wrote a series of articles in the Club's periodical "Vexilologie" in the period of 1978-1980. There he presented flags of 214 Czechoslovak municipalities including those of the 18 Prague boroughs (1). He even seized the opportunity to co-produce a geography and heraldry book on Czechoslovak district towns and inserted in it vexillological data on 90 towns. The book appeared under the title "Klič k našim městům" in 1979 (2).

The comparatively small number of flags discovered (flags of 214 Czechoslovak municipalities were determined, though there are about 600 towns -- and several hundred municipalities in this country) and the many contradictory as well as incomplete data showed that the further investigation of Czechoslovak municipal flags had to lie in detailed research of files in municipal and district archives, accompanied by careful studies of municipal newspapers and the examination of collections in municipal museums. Such activities are, however, very time-consuming and we do not expect -- that they will be finished soon.

It is interesting to note that there are newspaper articles that have proved to be a rich source for data on municipal flags used in Czechoslovakia, especially before World War II. Articles reporting the course of festivities in towns (particularly town centennials or anniversaries of its important corporations) often mentioned how streets were decorated and what

municipal flags looked like. The author of this paper succeeded in finding flag descriptions of about 40 further Czechoslovak towns mainly -- due to the method of a systematic study of newspapers that were published in the 1920's and 1930's.

This next stage of the investigation of Czechoslovak municipal flags has resulted in the publication of relatively complete studies concerning municipal flags of single towns or single districts. Thus, an article on city flags used in the district of Ústí nad Labem and a subsequent one on the history of flags of Liberec by the author of this paper appeared recently in "Vexilologie" (3). Further articles are in the process of elaboration.

After this short introductory I wish here to give you a general overview of municipal flags used in a part of my country - in Bohemia.

This historical territory is divided nowadays into five administrative regions (North Bohemia, East Bohemia, West Bohemia, South Bohemia and Central Bohemia). Its area is about 53.000 sq. km and has population of more than 6 million inhabitants. We have found up to now at least 183 Bohemian municipalities that have ever used flags. The majority of these municipalities started to fly their flags in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. However, Free Royal Cities (e.g. Střibro and České Budějovice) had their banners in the late 14th century. Later on even Vassal Towns (e.g. Hrob in 1477) had the right to use banners. These banners often displayed municipal arms and were flown by municipal military units up to the 2nd half of the 18th century when these units were replaced by standing armies.

The flowering of Bohemian municipal flags came in the 1920's and 1930's. At that period especially towns with a majority German population on the Bohemian border used municipal flags. Germans preferred municipal flags to the Czechoslovak State Flag and flew them on legal holidays when flag-flying was prescribed by state authorities. As the use of so called "all-German colours" (black over red over yellow) was prohibited in our territory after 1918, the German population hoisted municipal flags on schools over business premises, and on their private houses in Bohemia several times a year. These flags were mostly bicoloured and often identical with those of neighbouring towns. Therefore they often bore municipal arms in the centre, particularly at times when they were used outside the town or at flag displays in other Bohemian towns with the German population.

However, some flags were adopted only in the last few years. Thus, the town of Týnec nad Sázavou introduced its flag in 1979 after it had asked the Prague Vexillological Club for assistance in choosing its symbol. The winning design was submitted by Pavel Fojtik, a member of Club's Committee. He placed the municipal arms towards the hoist on a field consisting of four horizontal stripes.

The legal basis for municipal flags in Bohemia was established by Law - No. 269 of 21 October 1936. Nowadays, there is a special code and a statute that legalize the flags of Prague and Plzeň respectively. Flags of recent date are often recommended by the Czech Commission for municipal arms in Prague, district archives or museums, and are discussed in the Town Council Committee (rada městského národního výboru) and approved in the plenary session of the Town Council.

As for the flag pattern, most Bohemian municipal flags consist of two colours. They are often taken from those of the shield of the municipal arms and from those of the component elements. Of 190 flags used in 164 Bohemian municipalities in the 19th and 20th centuries 139 flags (73%) are bicoloured. 125 flags have these colours in two horizontal stripes.

As municipal flags are usually suspended from the top edge like a gon-falon, it was not easy to determine the correct arrangement of colours. Anyway, the most common combination is white over blue (or blue over white) that is in 42% cases. Red with white (or white with red) is next in popularity (20%). This is followed by yellow with blue (12%) and by red with yellow (8%). On the other hand there is only one flag of black over red (Hořovice) and one flag of green over red (Vysoké Mýto). The rest of the bicoloured flags have three horizontal stripes (5 towns), four horizontal stripes (3 towns), five horizontal stripes (only the town of Duchcov) and even seven horizontal stripes (Most and Netolice). An exceptional arrangement of two colours can be seen on three flags (Litomyšl uses a red flag with a white heraldic lily, Tábor has a black flag with a red fimbriation and a red chalice in the upper left corner, the Jewish quarter displayed a yellow star of King Solomon on red).

As for the flags of other than two colours, 41 flags (21%) have three colours and 7 flags four colours. When a flag is composed of three colours, they are mostly arranged in 3 horizontal stripes. The most common colour combination is white, yellow and red followed by white, red, blue. The most complicated flag pattern is probably that of Horšovský Týn. (Its new flag is divided vertically into grey, blue, and blue, but the lower part of the grey stripe is replaced by a smaller vertical stripe of red and a larger one of white.) On the other hand, 3 towns (Karlovy Vary, Liberec and Rabštejn nad Střelou) used a plain flag with or without municipal arms in the centre.

Finally, I would like to introduce the flags of the 10 most populous Bohemian towns.

PRAGUE. The former flag of the capital of Czechoslovakia was black over yellow. It was not in favour as the colours were identical with those of the Austria monarchy. Now colours (yellow over red) were derived by a Prague archivist and historian Josef Emler from the contemporary arms of Prague in about 1886. They were widely used for the first time probably during the great exhibition in Prague in 1891. Their usage is regulated by a special code of 19 December 1964. Prague flags can be hoisted only next to the Czechoslovak State Flag and often decorate trams and buses as it was seen e.g. during the World Icehockey Championship in Prague this April (Fig. 1).

PLZEŇ is the capital of the West Bohemian region. Its flag is quartered into four rectangular fields of white over green at the hoist and yellow over red in the fly. This flag pattern was already used in the 19th century, though the sequence slightly varied: the white was over the yellow at the hoist and the green over the red in the fly. J. Strnad, the town archivist, recommended the simplification of this flag in the late 19th century, so that the flag would consist of four horizontal stripes of red over white over green over yellow. Unfortunately, we have no evidence that a flag with horizontal stripes was ever used. Nowadays both variants of the quartered flag are flown in Plzeň, though only the former is described in the Town Status of 1972 (Fig. 2).

LIBEREC is the most populous town in North Bohemia. Its present flag -- was adopted only in 1978 and consists of red over white with the municipal arms in the centre. They are separated from the stripes by a yellow fimbriation (Fig. 3). This flag was used for the first time at the Liberec trade fair in 1980. Red and white are taken from municipal arms (a red stone wall on a silver shield). These colours were already used on municipal flags in Liberec in the early 19th century. After 1848 the "all-German colours" dominated in Liberec in 1906. However, when the Austrian Emperor visited Liberec in 1906, municipal flags of blue over white were flown. Since about 1920 to about 1948 the inhabitants of Liberec used a plain blue flag sometimes bearing the municipal arms in the centre.

HRADEC KRÁLOVÉ capital of the East Bohemian region, used a tricolour of white over yellow over red in the 1920's and 1930's. The colours came from the municipal arms (a silver double-tailed lion with -- yellow claws on a red shield), (Fig. 4).

PARDUBICE, the 5th most populous town in Bohemia, does not fly municipal flags.

ČESKÉ BUDĚJOVICE, capital of the South Bohemian region, has a simple flag of yellow over red. (Fig. 5). It has been flown very occasionally, e.g. during the 700th anniversary of České Budějovice in 1965.

ÚSTÍ NAD LABEM, capital of the North Bohemian region, does not fly municipal flags nowadays. However, a bicolour of red over white was used in the 19th century as well as in the early 20th century (Fig. 6). Its colours are derived from municipal arms (a silver lion on a red shield). When the adjoining village of Střekov was proclaimed a municipality, the flags of Ústí nad Labem were flown parallel with those of Střekov (blue over white over blue) in 1936.

KLADNO. Those who have visited this coal-mining and industrial town in Central Bohemia could see its flags of white over blue. These flags -- occasionally display municipal arms in the centre (a half of a silver eagle and a yellow lynx with silver mining hammers in chief on a blue shield (Fig. 7).

MOST is another coal-mining town. Its flag of blue over white was widely used in the early 20th century. The present flag repeats these colours in seven horizontal stripes of blue over white (Fig. 8).

KARLOVY VARY. This town in West Bohemia is famous for its healing spas. A bicolour of white over red was flown there in the 19th century. As this flag was identical with that of Bohemia, the German population living in Karlovy Vary preferred a plain red cloth with the municipal arms in the centre. However, this flag was not used for a long time and a bicolour of red over white was reported in 1933. After World War II white over red was adopted again. This bicolour displays the municipal arms in the centre (a silver Czech lion standing on red and white wavy lines). (Fig. 9).

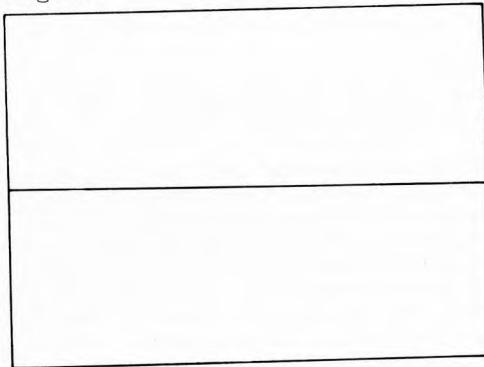
CHOMUTOV is the last town whose flag we are describing. It is situated in North Bohemia and flies a flag of two stripes, blue over white. Sometimes white over blue may be even seen. Municipal arms are usually placed in the centre. They display a silver stone wall with a golden gate on a blue shield. In the centre of the gate are the Bohemian arms with the Bohemian Royal crown at the top (Fig. 10).



NOTES:

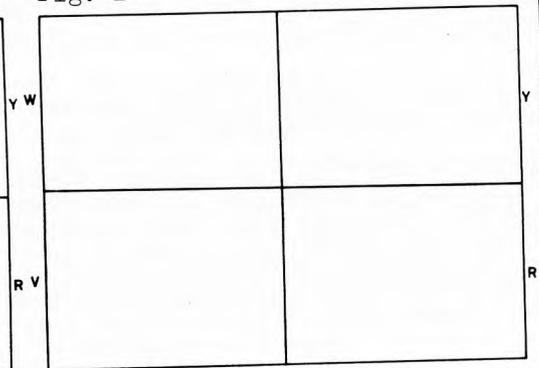
- (1) : L. Mucha - B. Mašek, "Vlajky a prapory československých měst," VEXILOLOGIE, No. 28, pp. 439 - 454. L. Mucha, "Vlajky a prapory československých měst," VEXILOLOGIE, No. 32-33, pp. 523 - 554, No. 37, pp. 651 - 656, No. 39, pp. 709 - 717.
- (2) : K. Liška, L. Mucha, *Klíč k našim městům* (Prague: Práce, 1979) 252 pp.
- (3) : A. Brožek, "Vlajky a prapory ústeckého okresu," VEXILOLOGIE, No. 43, pp. 831 - 836. A. Brožek, "Z historie libereckých viajek," VEXILOLOGIE, No. 55, pp. 1135 - 1141.

Fig. 1



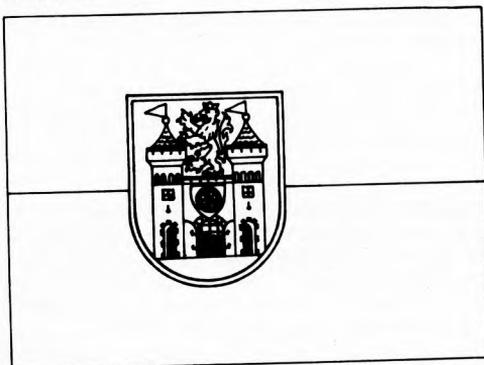
PRAGUE

Fig. 2



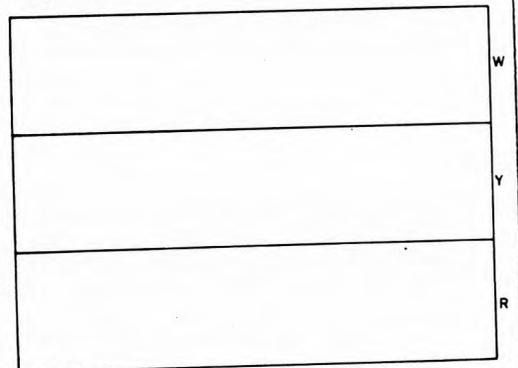
PLZEŇ

Fig. 3



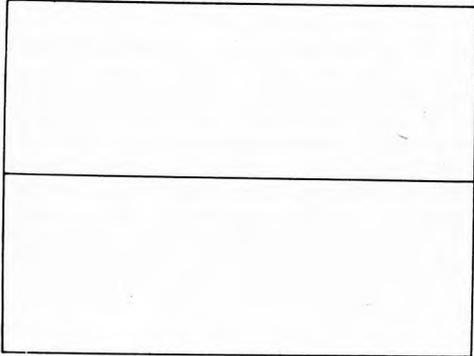
LIBEREC

Fig. 4



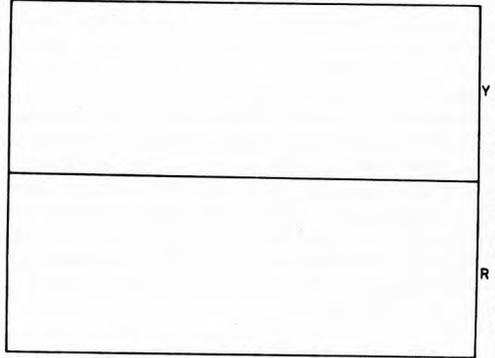
HRADEC KRÁLOVE

Fig. 5



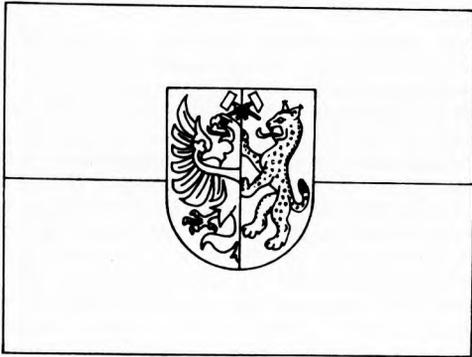
ČESKÉ BUDĚJOVICE

Fig. 6



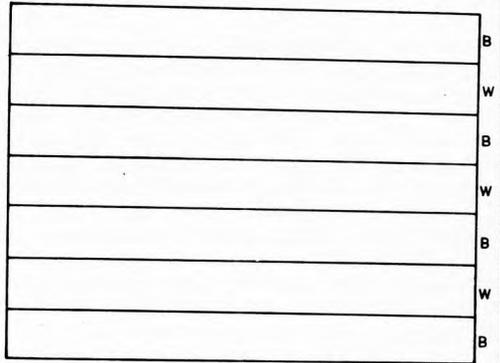
ÚSTÍ NAD LABEM (19th c.)

Fig. 7



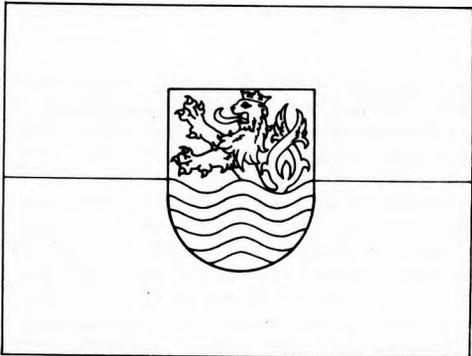
KLADNO

Fig. 8



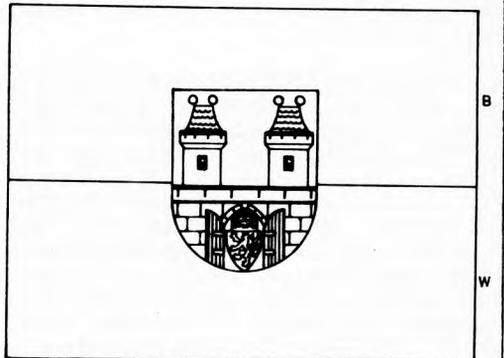
MOST

Fig. 9



KARLOVY VARY

Fig. 10



CHOTUMOV