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Czech and Czechoslovak Autoclub during the Period 1904–1928

Abstract

The article looks into motor racing and the activities of the Czech and Czechoslovak Autoclub since its establishment in 1904 until 1928. The activity of the Autoclub is analyzed mainly in connection with the establishment and activities of the social elites in interwar Czechoslovakia. Thanks to its representatives' contacts with leading politicians and industrialists in the country, the Autoclub of the Czechoslovak Republic was a very influential organization. In its activities, it benefited from economic stabilization and the subsequent economic boom in the first decade of the existence of interwar Czechoslovakia.

Keywords: motor racing, organizational structure of the Autoclub, international contacts, clubhouse.

Introduction

Newly established Czechoslovakia was certainly not born into favorable economic conditions and the new Versailles arrangement with its new customs regulations between the old and new states was not in favor of the export-based industry of the new republic. In addition, the industrially developed Czechs had to take care of the development of agricultural Slovakia and very backward Carpathian Ruthenia.

Still, the index of the industrial production in the Czech lands reached 76,7% in 1919 as compared to 1913¹ One of the factors that limited the further development of the economy and of automobiles was a catastrophic shortage of gasoline.

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¹ Z. Kárník, *Československo v éře první republiky (1918–1929)*, Nakladatelství Libri, Praha 2000, p. 211.

Until mid-1921, Czechoslovakia had the same rate of inflation as Austria, which continually increased the price of production. The black market was thriving and the prices were growing even in the regulated market which, together with the stagnation in the increase of wages, led to a social unrest. The wages of qualified workers and lower office workers were around 600 crowns per month but their real value was down by half due to the increase in prices since 1913². The Minister of Finance Alois Rašín, whose main priority was the consolidation of the economy and not the social politics of the state, resorted to a radical rescue of the currency. In April 1919, the Czechoslovak koruna separated from the Austrian currency which was on the brink of doom. The stabilization of Czechoslovak currency was also further supported by other measures such as wealth tax and war profits tax or the foundation of the Bank Office. The following deflation policy tamed the inflation. It made the export, and by extension, the production more expansive, which together with low purchasing power of the population prevented the development of the domestic market, still it was necessary for the recovery of the Czechoslovak economy. The economic revival did not take long to come about. From the end of 1923, there was an apparent economic growth which, with slight fluctuations, brought about the development of the tertiary sphere and the rise of the middle strata. However, only the top of this middle class achieved living standards that allowed them to become members of the elite clubs such as Autoclub (its development in the first ten years of the “First Republic” is the focus of this paper).

For many, being a member of an automobile clubs became a hobby or even a passion; it was a demonstration of one’s social status, a possibility to travel, organize races or take part in them. A prerequisite for such activity was non-standard financial means. The car elite has one feature in common – they all owned a passenger car. This was a sign of high social status. In itself, it clearly signified affiliation to affluent social strata, because the purchase of the car was a significant financial investment.

In the 1923 magazine *Auto*, we read: “The idea of a small car in 1923 characterizes our automobile industry. It is still not a car for the masses because its price is quite high above 50,000 crowns”³. The first car for the masses Tatra 11, the cheapest version of which cost less than 40,000 crowns, was premiered at the Prague Motor Show in April 1923. On Christmas 1918, buying a car would be a problem even for the Ministers of the first government, whose annual salary was set at 60,000 crowns⁴.

² Ibid, p. 53.

³ *Auto*, 1924. p. 9.

⁴ A law from December 20, 1918, on the salaries of Ministers. In 1920, the Ministers received a CZK 40,000 raise. In the following year, their income was fully taxed, and in 1932, under the “Personal Austerity Act”, their income was taxed by another 15%. The salaries of the president, prime minister and rest of the ministers were not used for the pension benefit assessment. The

In 1921, “Vehicles of all kinds with motorized propulsion [...] apart from draisines and locomotives, trucks and ambulances were included among “luxury products”⁵. The economic conjuncture after 1923 also reflected in the fact that only cars of higher level, i.e. “Passenger cars [...] with 4 cylinders or cylinders with engine capacity of more than 2.5 liters” were also considered luxurious⁶.

In 1924, a car manufacturing company Praga launched its smallest car Piccolo. It was a small car with a 707cc and 10 hp engine. From the beginning of the 1920s, all car manufacturers in Czechoslovakia concentrated on the production of smaller cars, the basic simple version of which was to be accessible to a wider range of customers. At that time, the description of these as cars “for masses” was more of a marketing matter. The situation changed in the 1930s – one of the most popular and widespread cars of the 1930s Aero 30 cost around 25,000 crowns in 1934. With this price, it was no wonder that in 1937 there were on average two cars for 100 households in Czechoslovakia⁷. In the same year, the annual income of a qualified worker in big factories in central Bohemia and in Brno, where salaries were the highest, was around 11 400 crowns⁸. Of course, the distribution of the ownership of passenger cars was uneven. Most cars rode in Prague. Prague was followed by Brno, but in the Slovak countryside this means of transport was a rarity.

Czech Motorists before the Establishment of Czechoslovakia

The most important car club in Czechoslovakia was the Czech Car Club which was founded on March 20, 1904, at the pub “U Pinkasů”. A year later, the Club already had 34 members who paid an annual contribution of 25 crowns a month. Their main concern was the search for gasoline, which was sold only in pharmacies and drugstores in three-liter bottles⁹. The Czech Car Club closely co-operated with the Czech Motorcycle Club and in 1909, during a general assembly of the Car Club, there was “a proposal for the two clubs Č.K.A. and Č.K.M., who had lived in fraternity since their foundation, shared common rooms, secretariat and organized joint ventures [...], to adopt a common name and merge into one

adoration for the president the liberator was also reflected in his salary. TGM had an annual income of half a million, and on February 26, 1930, a regulation was adopted “to celebrate the 80th birthday of President T.G. Masaryk, the state treasury will release CZK 20,000,000 to be used by the President at his discretion, the donation and subsequent use of the funds shall be released from all taxes, stamps, and fees on the recipient side.”

⁵ “General Turnover Tax Act 321/1925”.

⁶ Government regulation from March 13, 1924.

⁷ J. Bartoš, M. Trapl, *Československo 1918–1938*, Univerzita Palackého, Olomouc 2001, p. 69.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁹ J. Králík, *00 let klubového života 1904–2004*, Atelier Kupka, Brno 2004, p. 5.

club”¹⁰. The proposal was unanimously accepted and the unified Czech Automobile Club created two sections: car and motorcycle. The representatives of the Club also planned to create the aviation section and motorboat section but they never realized their ideas¹¹.

Although the general assembly of the newly united club voted Prince Erich of Thurn and Taxis to be their first president in 1909, the club was actually run only by its second president, an architect, Jan Heberle, “who had deftly understood the importance of this new means of transport at the time when it was only considered the latest fad”¹². Already in 1907, the architect Heberle negotiated in Vienna with Prince Solms, the president of Österreichische Auto Klub (Ö.A.K.), regular mutual contacts between the two clubs. The Č.K.A. did not have too harmonic relations with the Austrian club but in the period before First World War, when the Austrian-German and Czech nationalism grew stronger, both automobile clubs more or less cooperated (as opposed to other sports clubs). I believe these contacts were positively influenced by the common interest in the protection of automobile sport, which faced negative attitudes from the majority of the public as well as from state restrictions. In 1908, the Austrian parliament passed the Motor Third Party Liability Insurance Act which nearly doubled the cost of insurance and Austria became “the first and only country which made liability for damages caused by an automobile part of a special law with strict regulations”¹³.

It was also the affiliation to a social stratum which required somewhat more elegant ways of communication that played a positive role in the mutual relations. Vienna envied Prague its International Exhibition of Cars and Motorcycles which had been organized by the Czech club since 1903. In September 1912, the president of the club Jan Heberle suddenly died and was replaced by a building counselor. He was later replaced the following year by a general manager, Robert Patočka. In 1914, professor Otakar Kukula, MD, became the president of the club.

During the First World War, the club managed to avoid the negative attention of the Austrian authorities through clever and reluctant declarations of loyalty. Each year, the club representatives contributed 10 000 to the Austrian loan, but as they did not trust the state bonds, they immediately sold the bonds from the previous year. In 1917, the “Board of Trustees for the Society of War Sponsorship” offered the club portraits of the last Austrian Majesties, Charles and Zita. Because the loyalty of individuals and societies was very closely observed, it was not so easy to refuse such offer in this case, but again, the club did not want to decorate their rooms with these portraits. Finally, they found the way out:

¹⁰ “25 let Autoklubu Republiky československé” In *Auto*, 1929, p. 212.

¹¹ The aviators founded the Aero Club of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1919, the motorboats remained part of the Czech Yacht Club.

¹² Jan Heberle was present at the birth of the Pacov car racing circuit and the biggest and best-known car race Prague-Jiloviště.

¹³ *Auto*, 1929, p. 210.

They informed the society that the club was considering the acquisition of a portrait of the Emperor to decorate their rooms and that to this effect a special commission was established (which was actually elected), which was to concentrate on this issue and negotiate with several artists about creating a dignified and artistic portrait of the Emperor. The commission “concentrated” on the issue until the Austrian empire crumbled and the commission disbanded without completing its task¹⁴.

The Motorists after the Establishment of Czechoslovakia

“On the memorable day of our liberation on the 28th day of October, a member meeting was held in the joyous excitement of all participants”¹⁵. Yet, the first weeks of the new state were not in the spirit of harmony within the club’s leadership. At the end of 1918, “the club president, professor Kukula, sent a letter to the executive committee complaining about the fact that he had been attacked from different directions and blamed for a lack of nationalist attitude”¹⁶. Although the committee allegedly unanimously expressed its confidence in its chairman, by the end of February of the following year a crisis occurred in the leadership of the Czech Automobile Club and the President, professor. Kukula, announced his resignation “stating fundamental disagreements with the committee”¹⁷. The details of the nature of the disagreements were kept discreet by the *Auto* magazine, so we do not have more information on this matter. We can only guess that professor Kukula was blamed by some for expressing his loyalty to the fallen monarchy, mainly for “the condolence speech he delivered at the Imperial and Royal Stathaltter with Dr. Mířička on the occasion of the death of the Emperor Franz Joseph”¹⁸ or his activity in different military roles. By 1920, all disagreements were resolved and the representatives of the Club continued to work as one big, happy family.

In June 1919, the General Assembly of the Club authorized the change of the Club’s name into Czechoslovak Automobile Club and later in 1922 to Autoclub of the Czechoslovak Republic. At the opening of the international automobile exhibition in August 1920, the President of the Club evaluated the pre-war period: “Although the former Austrian government did not underestimate the importance of the development of the automotive industry, we felt we were under a lot of political subjection” and he stated that “today, we are responsible for our future; today, we are finally able to show the world that we are equally capable of entering the noble competition with other nations in the world arena of culture, art, business, and industry”. He went on to emphasize that “there is no doubt that

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 223.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 224.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 222.

motor sport is an important part of modern industry [...] we could even boldly say that the development of automotive industry in each country is a reliable indicator of its technical equipment”¹⁹. The negative attitude towards the entertainment of the privileged, however, did not change in the new republic. A message from the Ministry of Education to the Club from 1919 stated that “their request for the education of the youth in regard to the danger of throwing stones at the automobiles was favorably responded to”²⁰. As late as in 1928 at the 24th General Assembly of the Autoclub, the following statement was heard: “Although the unjustified public opinion as to the automobile as a luxury was for the most part finally disproved, there still remains a lot of incomprehensible hostility which still regularly appears where the less is expected”²¹.

The unstable domestic and foreign political position of the young state did not favor the development of motor industry. Petrol was in catastrophically short supply and it was rationed but the members of the club were not eligible for these rations and in 1919, the Ministry of Interior forbade the cross-border buying of fuel.

The representatives of the club were, however, successful in the field of automobile diplomacy. First of all, they strove for domestic and international recognition as “an official club of the Czechoslovak Republic” that is the supreme representative of the automobile sport and representative of all the automobile drivers in the Republic. They succeeded mainly thanks to a meeting “held on June 15 in Paris, when the Czechoslovak Automobile Club was accepted as the member of A.I.d.A.C.r.”²², an International Automobile Association (*Association Internationale des Automobiles – Clubs Reconnus*). This was also an important step towards the possibility of issuing permits for traveling over the borders. The club representatives obtained permission from the President Liberator and so the members of the club voted T.G. Masaryk a protector of the Czechoslovak Automobile Club during the Extraordinary General Assembly on November 22, 1920, “the result being accepted with a long-lasting applause”²³.

Members of the club were affluent people who did not lack in generosity. During their member meeting on June 14, they decided that “they would immediately donate CZK 5 000 from the Club treasury to the Czechoslovak Olympic Committee and later, a subscription was held among the members resulting in the amount of CZK 2 230, individual donations being from CZK 20 to CZK 500”²⁴. These donations helped to cover the expenses of the Czechoslovak athletes at the Olympic Games in Antwerp (the first Olympic Games where Czech athletes appeared under the new Czechoslovak flag).

¹⁹ *Auto*, 1920, p. 118.

²⁰ *Auto*, 1929, p. 225.

²¹ *Auto*, 1928, p. 142.

²² *Auto*, 1920, p. 141.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 218.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 26.

The creation of the Republic and the new organization of Europe led the Club representatives to think about what way the automotive sport and the automotive production would go. In June 1920, the magazine *Auto* published a contribution called "Czechoslovak Automotive Industry from 1910 to 1920", saying that "the motor port of the 1920s is substantially different to the motor sport of the 1910s. For while it was predominantly a sport in the first decade and the time of heroic competitions, the second decade puts its weight on the demands of a much more practical nature: The car ceases to be a sports equipment and becomes a utility vehicle. The personal car has descended from the pedestal and become an ordinary means of transportation"²⁵. Undoubtedly, the aforementioned statement can be considered as the goal that the European automobile industry, including Czechoslovakia, wanted to achieve. As a report on the real situation in the 1920s, this statement is somewhat exaggerated. As we have already shown, in the 1920s, especially at the beginning, the passenger car was far from accessible to members of all social groups, with members of the club being the "top ten thousand" among the car owners.

The club became a community of the chosen ones who were connected by their affinity to motor sport and by their determination to contribute to its development but also by belonging to the higher social class. Only the golf clubs could compete with the auto club in the number of factory owners among their members. Their ranks were joined by the directors of industrial plants and banks and men from the highest levels of state administration, such as heads of ministry departments, senior officers and army generals, and, last but not least, by high-income intellectuals: doctors, lawyers, and engineers. Higher education in itself signaled a high social status and only a fraction of the population (about 1–3%) had access to it. This trait applied also to other car clubs operating in Czechoslovakia. Some of them were led by famous people: for example, the president of Mährisch-schlesischer Autoklub Dr. Emanuel Proskowetz was a landowner from central Moravia and a pioneer of breeding malt grain varieties, the president of Autoklub für Mittelböhmen JUDr. Hanuš Ringhoffer was the first representative of the family industrial empire of Prague Germans in the interwar period²⁶.

Apart from active membership, the club statutes contained also several other membership categories. In January 1925, the General Assembly of the Czechoslovak Automobile Club adopted a change in statutes, which definitively defined the membership of the club for the remaining period of the so-called First Republic. The statutes of each membership indicated their characteristics, which bore the seal of a clear social hierarchy.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 107

²⁶ As of 1923, he ran the newly established Ringhoffer-Tatra. He was also the Chief Executive Officer of the Brewery in Velké Popovice and Vice Governor of the Czechoslovak National Bank.

1. **Honorary members**

are appointed by the General Assembly upon the nomination of the executive committee. These are individuals who contributed to the common good of the club or motor sport as such, public figures and meritorious members”.

The qualities of the honorary members must have been beyond doubt because:

a debate over the nomination of the *protector* and the honorary members is not allowed during the General Assembly.

2. **Supporting members**

As supporting members, the committee is allowed to appoint individuals managing important government offices and corporations that have motor sport and its development in their jurisdiction. They are appointed for one administrative year.

3. **Active members**

Every owner of a motor car or anyone who has contributed to motor sport or whose employment is connected with motor sport can become an active member. Legal entities, whose interests are closely related motor sport, may also become active members.

4. **Corresponding members**

Individuals who have contributed to motor sport may be appointed corresponding members for one administrative year in order to achieve desired cooperation.

5. **Temporary members**

Exceptional foreigners or members of affiliated foreign associations, member of diplomatic corps with temporary residency in Czechoslovakia may be appointed temporary members by the president for the duration of 8 days or by the executive committee for up to one year²⁷.

Categories 2, 4, and 5 were evidently created for the purpose of domestic lobbying in favor of the club, for the development of motor sport and for development of useful domestic contacts, as these members did not pay the membership fees but still benefited from club membership. AKRČs also created the category of **Associated members** in order “to allow all owners of motor cars to take advantage of the economic benefits provided by the club’s special arrangements (issuing of foreign driving licenses, travel information, official stations, expert advice, protection of interests of general nature, etc.)”²⁸. To become a member of this category, the motor vehicle owner needed to forward a special application form. The reason for setting up this category of associated members was “that the motor vehicle owners who cannot participate in our social life find the membership too high”. The associated membership, which could be extended every year,

²⁷ *Auto*, 1925, p. 77.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 78.

was a service for “regular” motorists, for which they had to pay registration fee and membership fee one year in advance, but the amounts were quite reasonable: CZK 20 for registration fee and an annual contribution of CZK 100; which was in 1928 raised to CZK 150. The clause stating that, apart from economic benefits, the associated members were “not eligible for any other member’s rights”, clearly separated them from the club elite as they could not intervene in the management of the club or participate in the social events organized by the club. They simply received a season pass for commercial services provided by the Autoclub and the more they used it, the more it was worth the money.

The club was run by the active members according to standard principles of democracy. To ensure that the members were from the social class that corresponded with the social quality of the club, there were rather high membership fees: for individuals, the registration fee was CZK 300 and the annual membership was CZK 400. For the club members, these were clearly not amounts that would ruin their budget, but they were several times larger than it was usual, for example, in sports clubs and organizations. Whether a candidate for membership in the Club represented a sufficient level of social standing (besides the means), he was assessed individually and “the person whose membership application had been refused” was not allowed to appear at events organized by the Club as a guest. The active membership was also open to legal entities with CZK 1000 registration fee, which some companies took advantage of, probably to be in contact with influential and wealthy members of the club. All active members also paid “a mandatory contribution of CZK 100 to the magazine *Auto*, a club Yearbook and other publications”. Considering the number of members at the beginning of 1925 was 1067, it probably covered all costs of publishing²⁹. At the same time, only a thousand members prove that the club membership was not a mass thing. The club offered active members some advantages, for example, contracts with insurance companies, which provided them with a 20% discount on compulsory liability and 25% for collision insurance.

Between the general assemblies, the Automobile Club was run by the Committee and the Board, and various commissions were gradually established. In 1926, the Club had sports, operational, internal affairs, editorial, as well as construction, exhibition, and social committee. The members of these working groups worked intensively, for example, in 1925, they held 223 meetings without any reward. We can assume that the talks were businesslike because men from the highest levels of business and bureaucracy did not have time for a simple “chat”. The Automobile Club achieved remarkable results mainly because its volunteers devoted a lot of time to organize club activities, using their managerial skills and their contacts.

At the General Assembly in January 1924, the Club President, Otakar Kukula, pointed out that “Over time, the club developed from a small provincial club into

²⁹ *Auto*, 1925, p. 76.

a strong organization that is fully respected at home and abroad and became an important economic agent”³⁰. A year later, the General Assembly was run by the club vice-president Emil Miříčka, who replaced the sick president. At a small party celebration of the 20th anniversary of V. Vondřich victory in Coupe Internationale in July 1925, professor Kukula presented the jubilant with a diploma and over a glass of wine expressed his state of mind: “Friends, I am so happy to be with you here today. We need to meet more often in the fall”. Unfortunately, life had other plans. Otakar Kukula died suddenly on August 11 in Graefenberg Spa (today’s Jeseník). Professor Dr. Otakar Kukula was an excellent surgeon³¹ and in the academic year 1924/1925 also the Provost of Charles University. The popular president of the Autoclub was an avid car driver and according to Dr. Vondráček memories “a good-natured man, mentor of the medical students, ladies’ friend, passionate smoker, and drinker, and an ardent deer hunter”³². However, he suffered from angina pectoris and his lifestyle was fatal. Among the people, who paid their last respects to Otakar Kukula were the Minister of Public Works, Alois Srba, Ambassadors of Great Britain, France, and Italy, as well as the Chief of Staff, Gen. Mittelhauser. Otakar Kukula was replaced in the presidential post by the Vice-president JUDr. Emil Miříčka, who was one of the founders of the Czech Motorcycle and the Czech Automobile Clubs and a friend of the deceased. Dr. Miříčka was a member of the board of the Laurin Klement Company and after their merger with the Škoda Works, he was appointed to the company’s executive committee.

In 1926, when Emil Miříčka assumed the presidential position, the Autoclub of Czechoslovakia was already a remarkable club as to the extent of its activities. The Autoclub was the main organizer of the annual showrooms (exclusively until 1925) with a growing number of exhibitors and visitors. Starting in 1925, the club’s officials cooperated with “leading corporations of the automotive industry” in the organization of the exhibitions. In 1926, several years of club officials’ efforts were successfully completed and the first automobile maps were published. In 1925, the club became a founding member of the newly created international tourism organization *Conseil Central du Tourisme* based in Paris and began to offer consulting services. The crucial role the club played in the development of motorsport will be mentioned later. The Social Committee organized afternoon teas, sports courses and especially balls in the Municipal House, frequented by powerful and famous Czechs and foreigners.

The extent of Club activities was also reflected in the volume of monetary funds, or rather their turnover. As stated in the executive report for the General

³⁰ *Auto*, 1924, p. 54.

³¹ Prof. Otakar Kukula is one of the founding fathers of Czech surgery. He specialized in abdominal surgery and was the pioneer of the inflamed appendicitis operation. From 1904, he was the director of the first surgical clinic.

³² V. Vondráček, *Lékařvzpomíná*, Prague, Avicenum 1983.

Assembly in January 1925, the expenses for the year 1924 in the amount of CZK 850 000 were covered by “income from membership fees, registration fees, travel permit fees, international travel records, badges and club flags, exhibitions, etc.” The turnover of the accounting department, which grew by 27% against the previous year, reached CZK 13 521 000³³. The club probably ended in surplus, which was used in the following years for the acquisition and reconstruction of a new office building that was to reflect the importance of the club and represented the club accordingly. The club officials did everything in their power to fulfill their responsibility to “use the entrusted funds for the purposes which the club has set out in the statutes, that is, to support general development of motor sport”³⁴.

What was absolutely essential for the development of club activities, however, was the support “copiously given to our efforts from our government and its officials”³⁵. The club representatives cooperated primarily with the ministers and heads of departments of the Ministry of Public Works, which was responsible for car legislation and construction and maintenance of the state (i.e. the main) roads to which the major investments were directed, and on which the club began to participate over time. On July 14, 1927, the National Assembly of the Czechoslovak Republic adopted the Road Fund Law, the purpose of which was to “provide means to improve state roads, to partially cover the costs associated with maintaining, building and rebuilding state roads and bridges”. The funds were to be generated from the motor vehicle tax, portion of bus passenger fares, mineral oil import fees, customs on tire imports, and 70% of an excise tax on mineral oils³⁶. In December 1927, “the Autoclub negotiated a contract with the Ministry of Public Works, under which they were granted an exclusive right to build directional road signs and international warning signs on all national roads”³⁷. The contract was signed in May of the following year. “To pay the cost of one million, A.K.R.Čs. received, by the same contract, the exclusive right to commission all advertisements on state-owned land for a period of 10 years”³⁸. The Club, thanks in particular to the personal contacts of its representatives, also enjoyed the favor

³³ *Auto*, 1925, p. 76. After the First World War, motor sport was still in its infancy, so every motorist had to have a special document called “triptych” to cross the border. It was eventually replaced by international travel records. These documents were published by national auto clubs representing the country in the International Automobile Association. The Autoclub of the Czechoslovak Republic made agreements with the individual national auto clubs during the 1920s, so that Czechoslovak citizens could travel by car to most European states. The Autoclub had an exclusive right to issue the triptychs and travel records. After deducting the costs, this agenda was profitable, although not very excessively, it still became a stable source of income for the club.

³⁴ *Auto*, 1924, p. 55.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 54.

³⁶ “Road Fund Act” 116/1927.

³⁷ *Auto*, 1929 p. 245.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 183.

of the Ministry of Finance, the National Defense and the Office of the President of the Republic. The honorary members of the club included Chief of Staff, Gen. Eugen Mittelhauser and Chancellor of the President of the Republic, Přemysl Šámal. Among the fans of the club was also T.G. Masaryk, the protector of the club and a regular visitor of the Prague car showrooms.

During the 1920s, the Autoclub of Czechoslovakia became the umbrella organization of all automobile clubs in Czechoslovakia. These so-called affiliated clubs retained their full legal, financial and organizational autonomy, and their members were not members of AKRČs, but their representatives were in contact with representatives of the “central” club and more or less coordinated their activities with them.

Of course, with the millions in turnover, the ever-expanding organizational agenda and increasingly challenging managerial tasks, the club's volunteers had to rely on the work of professional staff. Given the extent of club activities, they were surprisingly low in numbers, had virtually no decision-making power and held only executive positions. In 1919, Ervín Pauček, Eng.D., who became the Secretary General of the Club, was assigned a task of building a club office. In 1928, 12 male office workers, 11 female office workers, and 4 servants were employed in the club's office, including the construction office, which was preparing the construction of the clubhouse³⁹. The Autoclub, like other clubs where volunteer officials were from among the intelligentsia (mostly engineers and lawyers) and middle or upper-middle class, demonstrated excellent work efficiency, including their professional staff. If inter-war Czechoslovakia can be an example to the present, it was the efficiency and effectiveness of the bureaucracy whether in the state, club or private sphere.

From the beginning of the 1920s, the AKRČs, or rather its representatives, worked almost without any problems with the German auto clubs, which was quite an unusual phenomenon on the club scene in the interwar Czechoslovakian. In 1921, on behalf of German clubs, the President of the “Automobil Club für Mittelbohmen”, Hanus Ringhoffer, declared that German clubs recognized the Czechoslovak club as the most important club⁴⁰. Although Dr. Ringhoffer was German by nationality, he felt the strongest loyalty to and responsibility for his family's empire and did not have a problem to maintain good relations with the Czechs from the top elites as well as with employees of his factories. The Autoclub members showed their appreciation by electing him to the committee of the Autoclub in 1928.

If the relations of the Czech Autoclub were sometimes tense before the First World War, they significantly improved after the collapse of the monarchy. On February 6, 1923, “Österreichischer Automobil Club celebrated its 25th anniversary

³⁹ *Auto*, 1928, p. 144.

⁴⁰ Nordwestböh. A.C. and Reichenberger joined this proclamation only after approval of the members of their clubs.

sary in Vienna and the AKRČs participated by sending out a special delegation” headed by the club vice-president Kumpera, a factory owner. Mr. Kumpera “greeted the celebrated club and on behalf of AKRČs acknowledged the 25-year long activity of the club in the field of motor sport”. He went on to “emphasize that a number of important issues in regard to motor sport needed to be addressed from the international point of view and appreciated the good relationship between the two clubs”⁴¹. The development of European car travel required international co-operation, which would be ruined by national hatred. In addition, bickering was below the standards of behavior of the upper class to which the members of both clubs belonged.

All auto-clubs that existed in Czechoslovakia had a set of common interests, aimed at ensuring that motorists had the best conditions for operating their machines and that it required, among other things, speaking to legislators, executive power and state bureaucracy that had motor sport under their jurisdiction and uniformly lobby for car owners. The associate club representatives understood that thanks to their acquaintances with the representatives of political elites, the representatives of AKRČs. were in the best position to advocate their interests. They, in turn, needed to regularly consult issues of common interest with the representatives of associated auto clubs and together find useful contacts at the regional and local levels. Thus, in January 1927, Cartel of the Autoclubs of the Republic of Czechoslovakia and associated clubs was born by a special agreement, with their seat in Prague. The cartel agreement codified the following rules:

3. Clubs that are members of the cartel maintain their autonomous status and rights, and this cartel agreement and its execution must not be at the expense of their status or their rights. In particular, the rights and duties of the AKRČs, arising from its position as a leading club and its membership in the *Association of International Automobile Clubs Reconnus*, the *International Club of Motorcyclists* and the *Conseil Central of Tourisme International* were not to be affected by this agreement
4. The purpose of the cartel is to unite efforts for the benefit of motoring and motorcycling and to defend the clubs' common interests.
- [...]
6. Each club will be represented at the congress by two representatives from among the members of the board or executive committee.
7. Each club has one vote.
8. Congressional resolutions are binding to all clubs, including those who did not send their representatives to the congress.
- [...]
10. If a case is not resolved unanimously, the issue is delegated to a working commission appointed by the congress. Five clubs nominated by the congress have to choose one delegate to be the member of the commission.
- [...]
14. The president of the cartel is the president of the Autoclub of the Czechoslovak Republic.

⁴¹ *Auto*, 1923, p. 96.

15. The presidents of the associated clubs sit in the board of the congress.

[...]

23. The administrative agenda of the congress and cartel is provided by the office of the Autoclub of the Czechoslovak Republic. The connected costs are covered by the Autoclub⁴².

The cartel agreement was signed in January 1927 by 26 automobile and motorcycle clubs, out of these 12 were German, 12 Czech and 2 Slovak. By April, the Cartel united 30 clubs with 9,800 members⁴³. On average, there were about 330 motorists and motorcyclists per club, with the majority being the motorists. The membership of the Automobile Club of the Czechoslovak Republic, which had 1226 members on January 1, was therefore about four times the average and consists of 12.5% of all organized motorists and motorcyclists. According to the State Statistical Office, in February 1928, there were 24 332 passenger cars in the Czechoslovak Republic (about 6 000 in Prague) and 20 200 motorcycles (2085 in Prague)⁴⁴, which means that more than a fifth of the motorists and motorcyclists were organized in the club and that is not a small number. However, it is quite problematic to use these figures to draw any particular conclusions. As mentioned before, in 1937, there were two passenger cars per 100 households on average in Czechoslovakia, which meant that a passenger car was definitely not a product of mass consumption in the interwar Czechoslovakia and its ownership remained the privilege of the affluent or at least more affluent classes and was a sign of high social status. Being a member of auto club meant being a member of the club of the affluent and important, and if the term were in use then, we could say of a VIP club.

The first Congress of the Cartel was held in September of the same year. Its participants agreed, for example, that no new clubs should be set up and that a minimum membership fee for all clubs should be stipulated “to eliminate unfair competition in attracting new members by offering abnormally low membership fees”⁴⁵. Additionally, they adopted a joint statement directed to state administration asking for changes in some regulations, including the abolishment of some of the taxes (for example, cobblestone and bridge tax) and improvement of the “quite disastrous state of our roads”.

The one-year review of the Cartel’s activities was very successful and the AKRČs representatives were very happy, stating that “the cartel proved to be a major contributor to the consolidation of mutual relations” and they saw in it “a solid and massive support for our motoring”⁴⁶. The next Cartel congress took place in 1928, again in September, and carried on in a very similar spirit to that

⁴² *Auto*, 1927, p. 3.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 226.

⁴⁴ *Auto*, 1928, p. 554.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 651.

⁴⁶ *Auto*, 1928, p. 143.

of the previous year. What is worth mentioning is the proposal of the representatives of A.C. Nordbohlen to “adopt driving on the right in the manner of the western countries and soon all neighboring countries”⁴⁷.

A very important part of the activities of the Autoclub of the Czechoslovak Republic was organization of car races. The length of this contribution does not allow me to pay full attention to the development of automotive races in the First Republic. Nevertheless, I will mention some of its essential or interesting features. The first post-war issue of *Auto* magazine published a reflection on where automobile and automotive sports will be heading:

The motoring of the 1920s is substantially different to the motoring of the 1910s. For while it was predominantly sport in the first decade and the time of heroic competitions, the second decade puts weight on the demands of a much more practical nature: The car ceases to be sports equipment and becomes a utility vehicle. The personal car descended from the pedestal and became an ordinary means of transportation. This shift appears to be evident in public automotive events as well. Simple speed racing is quickly losing its prestige and if such races are organized, they are more of an interesting attraction for the audience than valuable car competition. Today, reliability rides in difficult terrains or on mountain roads come in their stead⁴⁸.

The Club representatives, however, soon realized that neither the public nor the car manufacturers were losing interest in speed racing. That is why, on October 16 and 24, 1920, the sports committee of the Czechoslovak Autoclub, together with representatives of the car factories, unanimously agreed with the intentions of the Club and promised a general support to their events⁴⁹. The club was the supreme authority in organizing the races “because it is a member of the International Automobile Association and the International Motorcycle Federation”⁵⁰. The club organized some of the races and watched over the competitions held by other automobile clubs, ensuring that they follow the rules of the International Automobile Association as well as the rules of the Sports Committee of the Autoclub of the Czechoslovak Republic⁵¹. The most popular car race in Czechoslovakia was the Zbraslav-Jíloviště race, the first race was held as early as in 1908. It was Jan Heberle, the first president of the Club, who came up with the idea. Before the World War I, the race was organized also in 1911, 1913 and 1914. After the war, the tradition of the race was restored in 1921. In 1923, on the proposal of the sports committee, the Club Committee decided to issue a financial reward for breaking the records of this race in the amount of CZK 20,000 in the car competition and CZK 5,000 in the motorcycle competition.

⁴⁷ *Auto*, 1928, p. 620. During the First Republic, the Czechoslovak traffic drove on the left. This was changed during the period of Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.

⁴⁸ *Auto*, 1920/1921, p. 107.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 182.

⁵⁰ *Auto*, 1923, p. 204.

⁵¹ *Auto*, 1923, p. 204.

From 1915, the Club rented rooms in the Municipal House of Prague, where it also resided after the war. With the club's growing agenda and increasing number of members, however, these rooms became cramped and members of the club's committee began to look for a building that the Autoclub would buy and renovate for its headquarters. They considered different offers, but finding a suitable object at a reasonable price that would suit both the size and the good address was not easy. Finally, at the end of 1924, "by the courtesy of Mr. Tanzer, a factory owner"⁵², the club received an offer for the purchase of a suitable building "on the Lützow Street (today's Opletalova Street) next to the Vrchlického sady in Prague II" and the extraordinary general assembly of the Club unanimously approved its purchase on January 7, 1925. At the same time, the club entrusted "a special technical and financial committee with the preparation of the financial budget, and acquisition of cash for the necessary reconstruction of the clubhouse"⁵³. The costs of buying the house and its overall reconstruction were not published, probably because *Auto* magazine was widely accessible to non-members of the club, i.e. the wider public and journalistic community. As has been pointed out, a large part of the public looked at motoring as a snobbish entertainment of the rich and the publication of specific amounts, which would have probably shocked most of the wage-earners, would have confirmed it in this respect.

At the General Assembly in January 1926, the Vice-president of the Club Emil Miříčka said the following words: "The events of the recent times, which I do not want to go into detail about now, disturbed the internal harmony between the committee and the part of the membership which until now was so characteristic of our club and to which we have always proudly pointed to" and asked "for the re-establishment of friendly relationship between the leadership and club membership"⁵⁴. At that time, Dr. Miříčka discreetly withheld the cause, or rather causes, of the dispute, but he revealed it at the next General Assembly in the following year: "The project building of the clubhouse has caused a certain disarray among a number of our members"⁵⁵. The members were probably unhappy that "there were obstacles of internal and general character which forced the construction committee to re-examine and redesign projects, which required more and more time"⁵⁶. The president of the Club expressed hope that "The completion of this building will certainly bring former harmony to the ranks of our entire membership"⁵⁷. All's well that ends well. The members of the Club listened to their president and with the rapid progress of the reconstruction the situation in the Autoclub was calming down. The project of the clubhouse was commissioned

⁵² Here probably the Jewish industrialist Otto Tanzer.

⁵³ *Auto*, 1925, p. 73.

⁵⁴ *Auto*, 1926, p. 185–186.

⁵⁵ *Auto*, 1927, p. 224.

⁵⁶ "Pavel Janák: klubovní dům". In.: *Auto*, 1927, p. 230.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

to Prof. architect Pavel Janák. The four-storey building next to the club's offices included representative conference halls, two restaurants, and other spaces. The clubhouse designer anticipated that Lützow's Street would soon become "one of the liveliest Prague's arteries", among other things also thanks to "the bridge to the Pankrác plains"⁵⁸. In 1929, the total cost of building of the clubhouse had not yet been calculated, but its architect already said the preliminary estimate of the cost of 1 cubic meter was CZK 500. This somewhat premium price was due, among other things, to the fact that "more expensive materials were used than was usual: the walls and floors were tiled with marble, mirror glass, and with bronze fittings [...] which make the building quite extraordinary". Architect Pavel Janák mentioned that the amount of money that the automobilists spent on the clubhouse "can be compared to the costs of building the Municipal House of the City of Prague"⁵⁹.

The Autoclub clubhouse was inaugurated on March 25, 1929, with the participation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Edward Benes, the Chancellor of the President of the Republic Přemysl Šámal, English, Romanian, Greek and Austrian ambassadors, the representatives of universities headed by the Provost of CTU František Cloner, representatives of other clubs and many other celebrities. After the opening of the new headquarters, the main goal of the Club president, Dr. Miříčka, for the next period was the development of social life in the "in the beautiful clubhouse, where each member can find a second home, a resting place [...] and a suitable company"⁶⁰.

Despite the giant investment into the construction of the club's lavish headquarters, the president, in the annual report in April 1929, stated that "Our club property, quite naturally with prudent management, is quite natural, our financial economy is secured. We are at the height of the time, almost at the goal of our efforts"⁶¹. In 1929, the club celebrated a quarter of its existence. Its members not only looked back at the journey the club and the automobile had made over the past 25 years, but also regarded the future with great optimism. Emil Miříčka believed that "if the economic conditions in our country are only somewhat favorable, the number of cars will increase in several years to double, the car will spread [...] mostly in the middle class, in the area of trade, business or agriculture"⁶². The President of the Autoclub of the Czechoslovak Republic had no way of knowing that the black Thursday on the New York Stock Exchange, on October 24, 1929, which would start a global economic crisis, was inevitably approaching.

⁵⁸ *Auto*, 1929, p. 192.

⁵⁹ *Auto*, 1929, p. 194.

⁶⁰ *Auto*, 1929, p. 181.

⁶¹ *Auto*, Ibid.

⁶² *Auto*, Ibid.

Conclusion

The emergence and development of automotive sport and motoring in Bohemia and Czechoslovakia is closely tied to the activities of the Czech and Czechoslovak Automobile Clubs. The Czech Automobile Club was established in 1904 and was joined by motorcyclists in 1909 with whom it had always closely cooperated. Members of the club were pioneers of the automobile industry and mostly members of the upper-middle class, which is understandable since at least until the 1920s the car remained a luxury item, the purchase of which could only be afforded by the wealthy. The club's representatives maintained good relations with the Austrian Autoclub until the First World War, which was quite exceptional at a time when German-speaking relations between Austria and the Czechs had worsened.

The first post-war member meeting was held on October 28, 1918, on the day of the proclamation of the new republic, and participants enthusiastically welcomed the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic. In 1922, the club changed its name to the Autoclub of the Czechoslovak Republic. In the first decade of the interwar Czechoslovakia, the club became a very rich and influential organization and can serve as an example of the establishment of a new Czech-speaking elite of interwar Czechoslovakia, who unconditionally identified itself with the new state. At the same time, the representatives of the Autoclub of the Czechoslovak Republic maintained very good relations with representatives of the German auto clubs, which were created in Czechoslovakia. In 1927, a Cartel of the Autoclubs of the Czechoslovak Republic was established, bringing together 12 Czech, 12 German and 2 Slovak auto clubs. Both, the representatives and the regular members of automobile clubs usually belonged to the high society and the common sense of belonging to the social elite easily surpassed the possible national antagonisms.

The representatives of the Autoclub of the Czechoslovak Republic organized annual car shows and car competitions, the most popular of which was the Zbraslav – Jíloviště race (located near Prague); the first race took place as early as in 1908. The income of the club's treasury came from relatively high membership fees, state subsidies and, from 1927, also from the commission for the installation of signposts on all national roads. The influential representatives of the club were able to benefit from very good contacts with ministers and high bureaucrats from the Ministry of Public Works, which was responsible for the construction and maintenance of the state's main roads in Czechoslovakia and the economic development of Czechoslovakia in the 1920s. Due to the very good financial situation of the club, the decision was taken to build a representative palace in the centre of Prague, which was inaugurated in March 1929 and was used by all members of the club.

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Czeski i czechosłowacki Autoklub w okresie od 1904 do 1928

Streszczenie

Artykuł opisuje wyścigi samochodowe oraz działalność czeskiego i czechosłowackiego Autoklubu od jego założenia w 1904 r. do 1928 r. Działalność Autoklubu zanalizowano głównie pod kątem powstania i działalności elit społecznych w międzywojennej Czechosłowacji. Dzięki kontaktom jego przedstawicieli z wiodącymi politykami i przemysłowcami w kraju, Autoklub Republiki Czechosłowackiej był bardzo wpływową organizacją. W pierwszej dekadzie swojego istnienia w międzywojennej Czechosłowacji Autoklub wykorzystał stabilizację gospodarczą i późniejszą koniunkturę ekonomiczną.

Słowa kluczowe: wyścigi samochodowe, struktura organizacyjna Autoklubu, kontakty międzynarodowe, siedziba klubu.