

Profile: Vlastimil Ježek



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There are not many state institutions in the Czech Republic (CR) nowadays whose activities could attract such great attention from the media and wider public (both professional and general) as the National Library is managing to do. Its employees are collecting prestigious awards at home and abroad, unique historical acquisitions are finding their way into its collections, tens of thousands of visitors go to the exhibitions there, and one of the most discussed social topics is the planned construction of its new building – the project of Czech-British architect Jan Kaplický. Although the headquarters of the National Library of the CR is the erstwhile Baroque cloister in the centre of Prague, known under the name of the Klementinum, under the leadership of the current director general, Vlastimil Ježek, it presents itself as a dynamic, modern institution. Despite not coming from a library environment, Ježek managed to combine the erudition of specialist staff with his vision of what a library of the 21st century should be like. In order to fulfil this vision, he also brought into the team collaborators from the areas of public relations and management.

Vlastimil Ježek, born in Prague in 1963, belongs to the generation which formed its ideas in opposition to the conditions in Communist Czechoslovakia. After passing his school-leaving exam at grammar school, he worked for a year as a construction worker and later studied in the Faculty of Civil Engineering at the Czech Technical University in Prague, which he left after three semesters to become a teacher of mentally-retarded children in a social care institute. Between 1985 and 1990, he studied Czech and history in the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts at Charles University in Prague

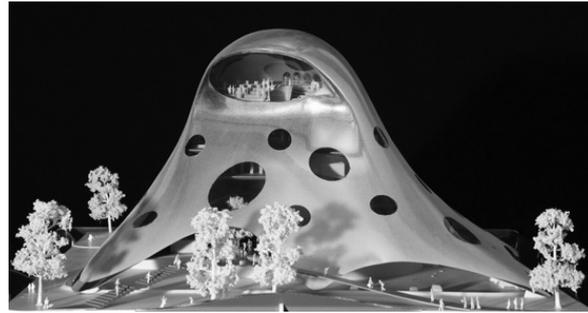
and, considering his radical ideas and natural authority, it was logical that he became one of the leaders of the student strike committee.

Between 1990 and 1993, he worked his way up from being a copy editor of the Culture column, to editor and then head of the domestic politics section of the daily, *Práce* (Labour). Among other things, he participated in the filming of the documentary on the war in the countries of former Yugoslavia, 'Vukovar: Town or Trap?' for the Four Oaks Foundation in New York in 1992. He began to acquit himself well as a manager in 1993, when he became Director General of Czech Radio, a post he held for the next six years. Between 1999 and 2004, he served as editor-in-chief of the weekly, *Naše rodina* (Our Family), and consultant for company communication, also writing commentaries for Radio Free Europe. Together with his college classmate, theatre critic Zdeněk A Tichý, he founded the production agency TICHÝ-JEŽEK which, in 2003, organized the festival 'Šest z šedesátých' ('Six from the Sixties') as homage to the legends of Czechoslovak theatre of the 1960s. He is also the author and co-author of several books.

Vlastimil Ježek was appointed Director General of the National Library of the Czech Republic by the Minister of Culture on 15 September 2004. It was obvious then that a strong managerial person should lead the institution which had struggled with a lack of space for its collections and for its readers for a number of years; a person with high expectations for himself and his subordinates, a person who knew how to negotiate with politicians and communicate with journalists. Ježek had already proved that he was that type of

person when he led Czech Radio. His requirements, however, caught some employees, used to a slower work pace, unawares, especially when they discovered that the new director rejected knee-jerk reactions such as 'that won't work' or 'we've always done it that way here'. Ježek did not win many points in the imaginary popularity charts this way, but he was not even trying for them, because his managerial credo is: "Don't do anything just to remain in the chair where you are sitting now. The chair is only a means, not a goal."

It is said that chance favours the prepared mind, and it is doubly true for Vlastimil Ježek. Shortly after he took up office, the National Library acquired the Paris fragment of the Latin translation of the richly illuminated *Chronicle of the So-Called Dalimil* at auction in Paris. (The Czech original of Dalimil's Chronicle is one of the essential works of Czech literature, and so the discovery of its unknown Latin translation was one of the cultural events of 2005.) By that time it had already become apparent that the team built by Ježek was capable of presenting the results of work of specialists in a captivating way, thus strengthening the brand of the National Library. Further rare acquisitions followed soon thereafter, and the collections there were enriched by such works as a Gutenberg-printed indulgence document from the 15th century. In 2005, the National Library of the CR was the very first institution awarded the prestigious UNESCO/Jikji Memory of the World Prize in recognition of its contribution to the effort to preserve the world's cultural heritage and make it accessible. In 2007, two collections from the holdings of the National Library of the Czech Republic were inscribed on UNESCO's Memory of the World Register: the Collection of Mediaeval Manuscripts of the Czech Reformation and the Collection of Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian Émigré Periodicals, 1918–1945. The exceptional successes of this institution are countless; its employees are among the world's top-ranking specialists in the field of digitization of manuscripts and early printed books. The most pressing task now confronting Vlastimil Ježek and his colleagues is the construction of a modern library. In May 2006, an international, public, 'blind' architectural design competition for the new building of the National Library was launched, according to the Rules for International Competitions of the International Union of Architects (UIA). On 2 March 2007, Vlastimil Ježek



Architect's model of the new National Library building

Photo: ©Future Systems

officially announced the winning project, designed by the architectural team Future Systems from Great Britain, led by Jan Kaplický. The future appearance of the National Library quickly became one of the most debated topics in the Czech Republic. The project, however, also aroused great interest abroad and, for instance, the judging panel at the Royal Academy of Arts' Summer Exhibition 2007 conferred upon it the prestigious AJ/Bovis Award for 'Best in Show'. The building, which will be constructed in the immediate vicinity of the historic centre of Prague, on the edge of Letná, will solve problems over lack of space and modern infrastructure with which the National Library has long been wrestling in the Baroque complex of the Klementinum. The earliest designs that attempted to resolve this situation are already more than 100 years old! So it is therefore evident that Vlastimil Ježek has tackled the problem of untying the Gordian knot which several generations of his predecessors could not solve. Unlike them, however, he has practically no room for manoeuvre. Time is unrelenting. He states that: "Unless the National Library has at its disposal further space for the cataloguing and deposition of new acquisitions by around 2010, its operations will inevitably collapse ... Or it will in an entirely unprecedented way be forced to limit its operations and services for the public, which would however mean in practice that it would cease to fulfil the law on the basis of which it was established."

The final answer to the question of how Vlastimil Ježek has succeeded in fulfilling the most difficult task of his managerial career so far will not be known for a few years. The ideal answer to it would certainly be the completion of the construction of the winning project for the new building of the National Library, which for now we only know as a bold vision of the architects.