

## Search for ideal municipal flags by Aleš Brožek

10 years ago I talked about Czech municipal flags at the congress for vexillology in Madrid. In a short introduction I stated that there were about 600 towns in Czechoslovakia at that time. However, flags of only 214 Czechoslovak municipalities were known. They were mostly simple bicolours with or without a coat of arms in their centre (1).

How has the situation changed since 1985? Before Czechoslovakia split into two independent countries, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic, the Czech National Council adopted Law No. 367 on 5 September 1990. Its article 5 allowed the use of arms and also flags not only to Czech towns but also to Czech municipalities. In case the municipality had no traditional arms and flags, these symbols might be granted by the Presidium of the Czech National Council. This law came into force on 24 November 1990.

150 or 200 new flags have been created since that time. These comparatively high figures might enable me to examine their designs and to classify them here. Unfortunately, it is impossible to tell their exact number because Parliament (as the Czech National Council is called today) has not produced their register for the public yet. The data presented here comes therefore from the archives of the Heraldry Commission of which I have been a member since 1991. This Commission is an advisory body of the Parliamentary committee for science, education, culture, youth, and physical training, has 13 members nowadays and is led by Mrs. Jiřina Pavlíková, vice-chairman of the parliamentary committee. Most members of the commission are archivists and experts in heraldry, one member is a medallist. There are only three flag scholars among them (all are members of the Prague Vexillology Club). The task of the Commission is to examine new arms and flag designs, and to describe them using heraldic and vexillological terminology provided their designs follow heraldic and vexillological rules. Speaking of the flag design, there are three main rules kept by the members of the Commission:

- distinguishability
- no shields on flags
- proportions of 2 : 3.

Distinguishability means that any flag of a Czech municipality should be distinct from other Czech municipal flags or from national flags. The absence of a shield from the arms is required because members believe that flags are derived from arms and therefore there is no need to display arms on them. The proportions correspond to those of the Czech national flag as the municipal flags shall have the same proportions if hoisted next to the national flag.

After new arms and flags are examined in the Commission, and the members consent to the designs and descriptions, their drawings are shown to members of the Parliamentary Committee who recommend that the chairman of Parliament issue his official decision. It enumerates municipalities which can use new symbols and is read at a formal meeting [1] where chairmen of towns and municipalities (burgomasters) are present. After a short speech given by the Chairman of Parliament a letter describing but not depicting new symbols is passed on each to representative. Although it is written on a computer in a normal rather than ornamental script (unlike the invitation card [2]) and this undignified way is often criticised, the whole meeting takes place under the attention of journalists. Therefore more and more municipalities ask the members of the Commission to design new symbols or to examine proposed ones. As there are more than 6,000 municipalities in the Czech Republic, there is still a lot to do.

All this process takes months or years as the Commission meets four or five times a year and many designs are sent back to applicants to modify them if they offend the rules. This was the case of the flags of Unhošť [3], Chomutov [4], and Šumperk [5] because each displayed a shield. Next slide shows how the flag of Šumperk [6] was finally solved.

There have been no minutes from meetings of the Commission so that it is very time-consuming to check the flag designs in order not to approve the same design a second time. After members of the Commission have no objections to the design of a flag or of the arms which must be in a big size and in colour, they start to describe them. As Czech heraldic terminology is not too strict, there are sometimes long discussions among heraldists. Flag designs are described according to the Vexillological terminology compiled by Z. Svoboda and published in 1972. However, it is too brief and it cannot be always used. In addition to it, heraldic members of the Commission often blame vexillologists for describing devices on a flag in a way which they consider to be exaggerated.

Let us look at a few new Czech municipal flags now. The shape of all of them is rectangular unlike those used in Slovakia where swallowtailed flags are used by towns and triple-swallowtailed ones by municipalities (2). As the most important colours of a flag are derived from those of the arms, there is only white, yellow, green, red, blue, and black.

Many of the new municipal flags consist only of vertical and/or horizontal stripes. Another group of flags uses bends (diagonal stripes). As the most frequent colour combination has been red and white, or blue and white, it is necessary to use more stripes and of different width. This is the case of the flag of Hrušovany [7] which has three red and two white horizontal stripes. The white narrow stripes stand for two silver fish appearing on a red shield of the arms of Hrušovany [8]. When three or more colours are taken from the arms, and their colour combination is unusual, three horizontal stripes of the same width can be permitted. Thus, Hvoždany uses a yellow-over-white-over-green flag. However, three horizontal stripes of different width are more often used and they can be seen on the flag of Kamenné Žehrovice [10] or that of Královské Poříčí [9].

Wavy stripes help flag designers to express the role of a river for the municipality. A simple solution of three wavy lines of white over yellow over red brought the first prize in a competition for a new flag of Děčín [11] to an artist from Česká Lípa. Another type of wavy stripes can be seen on an armorial flag of Havířov [12] where they stand for a dam.

Other flag designs use a vertical stripe at the hoist and two horizontal stripes in the fly. There were arms on a vertical stripe of the proposed flag for Nový Hrádek [13], before the Commission recommended they be removed. A quartered flag of Skalička is distinct enough thanks to a white-red cross in the centre of the flag [14].

Many Czech municipal flags display triangles, piles and chevrons. The blue wedge of the Czech national flag inspired designers of flags for Sobotín, Velké Poříčí na Moravě and Ostrov nad Ohří. Four white triangles are seen on the flag of Staříč [15] as they come from the arms. A white pile and a red triangle are used on the flag of Střítež [16]. The red triangle reflects the crossed feather and spear from the arms. A white chevron on the flag of Volary [17] may recall the initial of the name of the town and the shape of fir branches from the arms.

If each flag must be distinct from other flags and their designs must be attractive, a combination of geometric shapes is not sufficient. One solution which I, however, do not support in the Commission is a creation of armorial flags. This is the case of the flag of Havířov which we have seen before or that of Frýdek-Místek [18]. I recommend simplifying such flags by translating the arms into a flag model, taking only one of devices from the arms. Fortunately, at least 50 per cent of new Czech municipal flags follow such a flag design.

In classifying this type of Czech municipal flags, use may be made of the eight major categories of symbols outlined in Smith's book *Flags Through the Ages and Accross the World*. The categories are celestial objects, terrestrial objects, flora, fauna, humans, artifacts, abstract forms, and inscriptions.

The first category contains the sun, and the moon. They can be seen on the flags of Těrlicko (the sun) and of Rudice or Žalkovice (the moon).

Terrestrial objects can be mountains, maps, and water. The flag of Hrotovice [19] displays three white waves from the arms in which they represent the family of Hruty who established a lot of ponds. Therefore this flag may be classified here.

The use of plants and trees on Czech municipal flags is not so rare as terrestrial objects. The dogwood (in Czech dřín) appears on the flag of Dřínov, the oak leaf occurs on the flag of Lanžhot [20], the linden tree is used on the flag of Rakov, the heather (in Czech vřes) is on the flag of Vřesina, the birch leaf (in Czech březový list) on the flag of Březina [21]. Finally, the willow is displayed on the flag of Ústí u Hranic [22].

Thanks to a frequent use of the lion (e.g. on the flag of Hostomice [23] and of Rožnov pod Radhoštěm [24]) and of the eagle (e.g. on the flag of Týn nad Bečvou [25] or of Chrudim [26]), fauna constitutes the largest number of these devices on Czech municipal flags. Baška [27] uses a lamb, Slatinice a scorpion, Jindřichov [28] a cock, Velké Karlovice [29] a goat, Lhota u Lipníka nad Bečvou [30] a stag, Dolní Nětčice [31] a horse, and Jistebník [32] a carp.

I succeeded in finding only one municipal flag showing a human being. Frenštát uses a picture of St. Martin Turský sitting on a throne.

The typical motifs in the category of artifacts are tools. Troubky [33] employs a hunting horn, Nové Město na Moravě [34] two knives for wine-growing, Žákovice [35] a spade. The municipality of Karolinka [36] which is known for its glass-making industry portrays a goblet.

According to W. Smith, stars and crosses belong to abstract forms. A yellow eight-pointed star occurs on the flag of Šternberk [37], another eight-pointed star is seen on the flag of Zlín [38]. Five six-pointed stars appear on the flag of Šišma [39]. A red cross is displayed in the centre of the flag of Horní Nětčice [40].

The use of words or inscriptions on Czech flags is inappropriate and so only one flag can be classified in the category of inscriptions. That is a red flag with a white letter "T" standing for the name of the town Telč. This is the last information in this tour through Czech municipal flags. If you found an ideal one among them, let me know.

Notes:

(1) See A. Brožek, "Municipal Flags in Bohemia". In: XI Congreso Internacional de Vexilologia, Madrid 26-31 Mayo 1985, Comunicaciones. Barcelona: SEV 1987, p.302-307.

(2) See a lecture delivered by Z. Alexy at the 15 ICV in Zurich.

Numbers in brackets correspond to slide numbers.