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Bohemia after the Thirty Years War: Historical Sources Deposited in the National Archives in Prague

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We would like to introduce you to some of the most important archival holdings stored in the First Department of the National Archives in Prague, which can help genealogists in their research. We have in mind three particularly rich sources: the "Register of Subjects According to Their Religion" (a religious census) from 1651; the first Bohemian tax cadaster (which is called the "Berní rula") from 1654; and the revised tax cadaster from the first half of the eighteenth century (which is called the "Theresianum"). The first two of these extraordinary sources came into existence in Bohemia after the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) – the great religious census was drawn up in 1651, the great tax cadaster in the years 1653 and 1654. The third source – the great Theresianum cadaster of 1710-13 – arose out of a far-reaching tax reform undertaken in response to social and economic change at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

The 1651 "Register of Subjects According to Their Religion"

After the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), the situation in Bohemia became much calmer than it had been for the previous three decades. This made it possible to establish a politically stable government, to begin to re-Catholicize the Protestant sections of the population, and to create a new and functioning organization of local parish churches. A prerequisite for both the secular and the religious side of this re-imposition of government control over Bohemia was to obtain information about the true situation in all Bohemian regions at that time. This was the purpose behind the 1651 "Register of Subjects According to Their Religion" (which was intended to assist the secular government in its activities) and the "Status Animarum of the Diocese of Prague" (which was intended to help the ecclesiastical government in its own initiatives to re-assert control over the unruly Bohemian population).

The issuing of a Patent by the Governors of Bohemia on 4 February 1651 provided the direct impulse

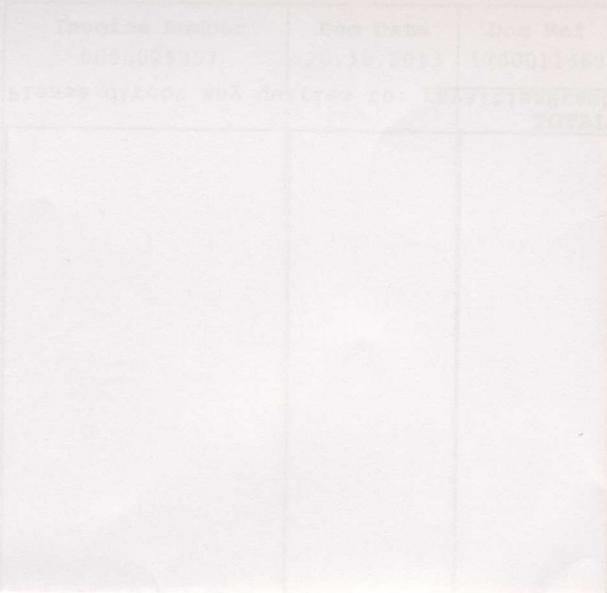
for creating the "Register of Subjects According to Their Religion" that year. This "Patent" (royal edict) ordered every overlord in Bohemia to ensure that a register was made of all Catholic subjects living on

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The Thirty Years War and Its Impact On Genealogical Records

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As you can see on the picture (page 15), which shows a sample page from the 1651 Register, the standardized form was organized in columns. The enumerator was supposed to write down, in separate columns, each person's name, social status, occupation, age, religious affiliation (including, for non-Catholics, whether there was "hope" or "no hope" that they would convert to Catholicism), and the family status of all members of each household, including all servants and farm labourers.

At the end of the Register for each estate, the enumerators were supposed to write up a report on the state of all clergymen's houses, churches, chapels, church property, tithes, church taxes, prebends, and the local church administration. Often this report also included the enumerator's comments about what progress had been made in re-Catholicizing the population, and about the extent and nature of war damages in the local region.

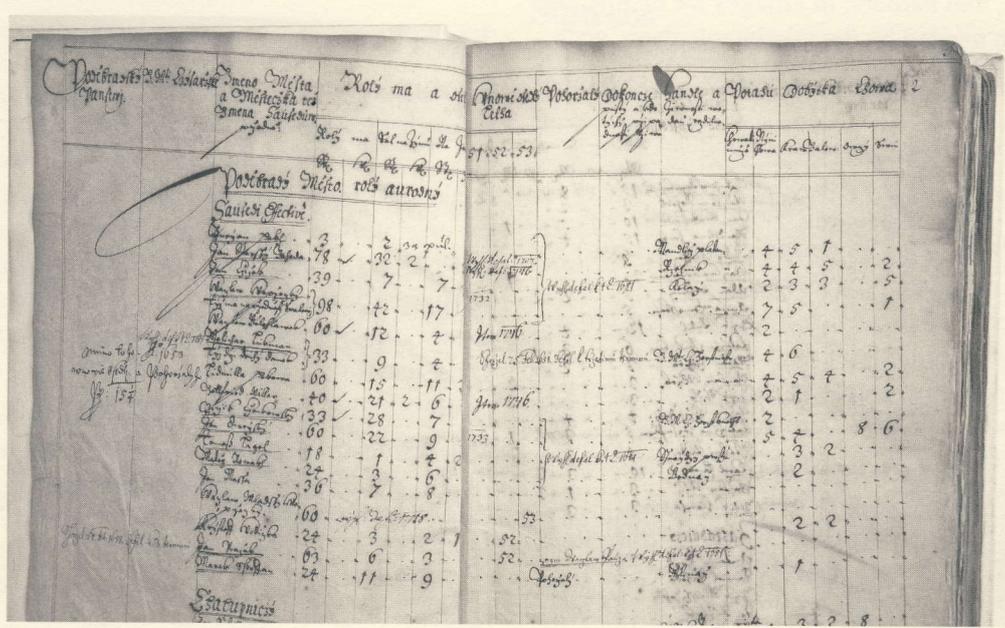
The Thirty Year War...cont'd from front cover

his estates, and to send it in to the Governor's Office through the Regional Commissioners within the next 6 weeks.

The Patent was sent out with a standardized form enclosed with it. This form was supposed to ensure that the register was written up in a uniform way across the whole country of Bohemia. The register was supposed to include not just "subjects" (the term used at the time for serfs), but also overlords, manorial officials, burghers living in towns belonging either to the crown or to the nobility, and freemen. The only persons who were supposed to be excluded were clergymen and soldiers.

The 1654 "Berní Rula" Tax Cadaster

The great tax cadaster of 1654 which was called the "Berní rula" was the outcome of a long series of negotiations between the sovereign and the Bohemian "Estates" – a sort of parliament, manned mainly by the nobles and higher clergy. The debate was about how land taxes should be collected. The result was the appointment of commissions whose duty was to write up a description of the entire country of Bohemia according to pre-defined rules. The idea was that this systematic description of the country would be used as a basis to



Berní rula (the first Bohemian cadaster) of the Poděbrady town, 1654.

quantify the number of taxpayers in the country. The commissions worked their way through each region of Bohemia, assisted in each feudal estate by the manorial administrators and the manorial offices. Then the commissioners sent their reports in to Prague, and these reports were used as the basis for writing up the definitive national tax cadaster of 1654 – the “Berní rula”.

This great tax cadaster recorded an enormous amount of information about each taxpayer in the kingdom, including:

- the name of the taxpayer (each farmer in a village, each burgher or craftsman in a town);
- how many fields the taxpayer owned (measured in “strich” – an old field measure, equal to about 0.285 hectares in modern measurement)
- how much the farmer sowed in the autumn (in Czech ozim) and how much he sowed in spring (in Czech jař).
- how many deserted fields and houses there were in each village and town
- the names of the newly settled farmers (between 1651 and 1653)
- the burned-down villages and the “burnt-out” farmers (in Czech pohořel, defalcírován), because they were tax-exempt for two or three years. The burnt-out farmers were recorded in the volumes of the Berní rula until the first half of the eighteenth century.
- the occupations of the taxpayers: so in towns we observe a whole variety of craftsmen, often very specialized ones such as furriers, stocking-makers, pastry-cooks, and barbers; in villages we mainly see the craftsmen needed by the inhabitants there, such as smiths, tailors, butchers and bakers.

A Bohemian subject paid taxes on almost everything he owned. For this reason, the tax cadaster also listed each taxpayer’s livestock – teams of horses or oxen, cows, heifers, sheep, pigs, and sometimes also goats. Ownership of draft teams of horses or oxen was an important fact helping the tax-commissioners divide farmers up into different social (and tax-paying) strata. There were three main social strata in Bohemian society: at the top the “sedlák” or “full peasant farmer”; in the middle the “chalupník” or “smallholder”; and at the bottom the “zahradník” or “cottager”.

- a “sedlák” or “full peasant farmer” was someone who was able to work on more than half of his fields, or was able to work for his overlord with at least one team of horses or oxen;

- a “chalupník” or “smallholder” was someone who was able to live from cultivating his own small fields;
- a “zahradník” or “cottager” was someone who had no land and lived from his own few animals (often just one cow) and from his wages as a labourer.

There were also families that lived in very small houses built on the common-lands of the village, but they were not included in the number of those who had to pay taxes from that village.

The commissioners also recorded the quality of the land in each village in three categories: rich, medium, and poor. This proved very useful when taxes were collected, since the quality of the land affected the productivity of the farm and the farmer’s ability to pay taxes.

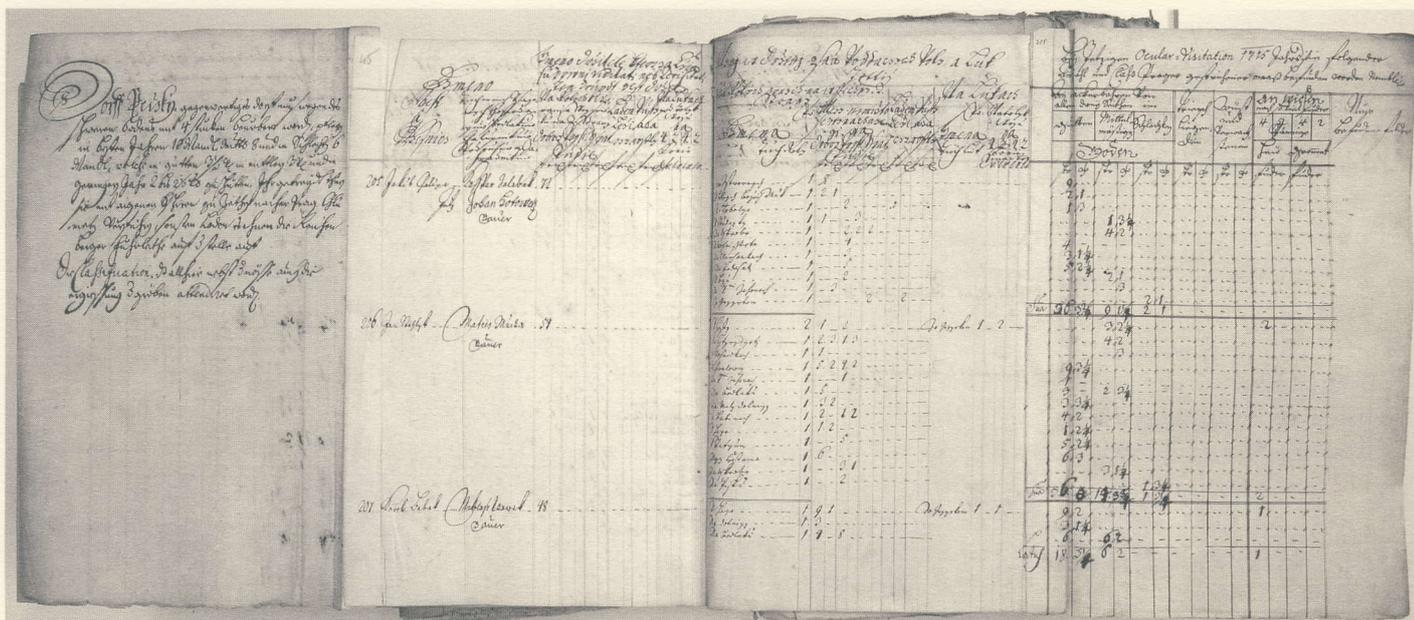
In a number of regions of Bohemia, the Berní rula also recorded, in its final columns, the shepherds and Jews, although the commissioners only wrote down the numbers (and not the names) of boys over 10 years and men over 20 years of age.

The historical background to the creation of this great tax cadaster of 1654 was the loss of population in Bohemia during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). This led to a huge increase in the number of deserted houses and farms in every village and town in the country. In turn, this generated strong pressure for the overlords to compel their serfs to stay on the estate, in order to fill up and cultivate the deserted landholdings. The overlords were supported in this by the sovereign, who wanted to keep his subjects settled and paying taxes.

The 1710-1713 “Theresianum” Tax Cadaster

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, however, economic development and changes in social conditions in Bohemia called forth a fiscal reform. This was the origin of the second great Bohemian tax cadaster of 1710-1713, which we call the Theresianum (after the Empress Theresia who ordered it to be made). We can follow the process by which the final version of the Theresianum tax register came into being by examining the documents that were written up during the preparatory stages. For instance, we find:

- income returns from vicarages;
- extracts from the 1654 Berní rula, giving the names of the farmers and the number and size of their fields;
- surveys of the size of fields, grassland and forests on each feudal estate; and



Tereziánský Katastr (Theresianum) of the Village Pečky, Fasse 1713, revision 1715, (fields)

- the number of water-mills and windmills operating on each estate.

The first phase of this great early-eighteenth-century tax reform gave rise to a document called the “Fasse” – this was the income return, prepared by the overlord’s main office on each feudal estate. This income return records a rich array of information about each village of each feudal estate, including:

- the names of the landowners;
- the number of their fields with information about the quality of land;
- the quantity of grassland in the estate (measured in terms of the numbers of cartloads of hay they produced);
- the number of livestock (teams of horses and oxen, cows, heifers, sheep, and pigs); and
- other sources of income of the inhabitants, for instance from crafts, small plots of forest, fishponds, and small businesses such as those of teamsters or carters.

The “Fasse” or income return also recorded the number of fields and grasslands owned by the vicarages and by the overlord himself, which were cultivated by serfs in return for an annual rent paid in money or in grain.

The information provided in the “Fasse” or income return was later checked by special commissioners, and

the annual tax levy was based on their results. However, the preparation of the great new Theresianum tax-cadaster was a very long process because there were numerous complaints against the registration, which were repeatedly referred back to the commissions. So the final version – the so-called “Elaborate” – was only finished in 1748.

Three Extraordinary Documentary Sources

Thus we have three extraordinary documentary sources from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which contain an enormous amount of information about the inhabitants of Bohemia at that time: the 1651 list of subjects according to their religion, the great Berní rula tax cadaster of 1654, and the great Theresianum tax cadaster of 1710-1748. Each of these unusually rich documentary sources recorded information very systematically, defined social categories very carefully, and used a uniform format – and these practices were generally observed by all the commissioners all over the country.

This makes it possible for us to compare the information given in several different historical sources over a long period of time. We can trace changes in ownership and taxation for a particular family or farm. We can often detect people’s decision to migrate. We can find out the economic and social position of individual fami-

lies. And we can analyze how the economic and social situation changed over time in villages, feudal estates, regions, and the country as a whole. Thus these extraordinary documentary sources not only give us many important details about each individual person living in Bohemia at that time, but also make it possible for us to trace out the entire course of economic and social development in Bohemia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Sources

NA, BR - Berní rula.

NA, SM R 109/45 – Soupis poddaných podle víry (divided up according to region; not preserved for the regions of Litoměřicko and Prácheňsko).

NA, TK-Theresianum (records, Fasse, 1748 final Elaborate, 1757 revision).

Authors

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Editor’s Note:

The CGSI plans to invite Dr. Matušíková to speak at one of our upcoming annual meetings or National Conference. There is also the possibility the Prague Archive will have a traveling exhibit of genealogy materials, consisting of copies of actual archival records.

