

## Mihajlo Rostohar, founder of experimental psychology at Masaryk University

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The foundation of the Psychology Institute at Masaryk University in 1926 is one of the pioneering acts in the history of Czechoslovak psychology, as it represents the start of the professionalization of psychology as an experimental discipline. The path to the achievement of this goal was not without difficulties. Mihajlo Rostohar (1878-1966), born in Slovenia, became the father of Brno psychology through a combination of both favorable and very unfavorable circumstances. He had been in contact with Czech intellectuals since his student years, and Czechoslovakia had lastly become his second home.

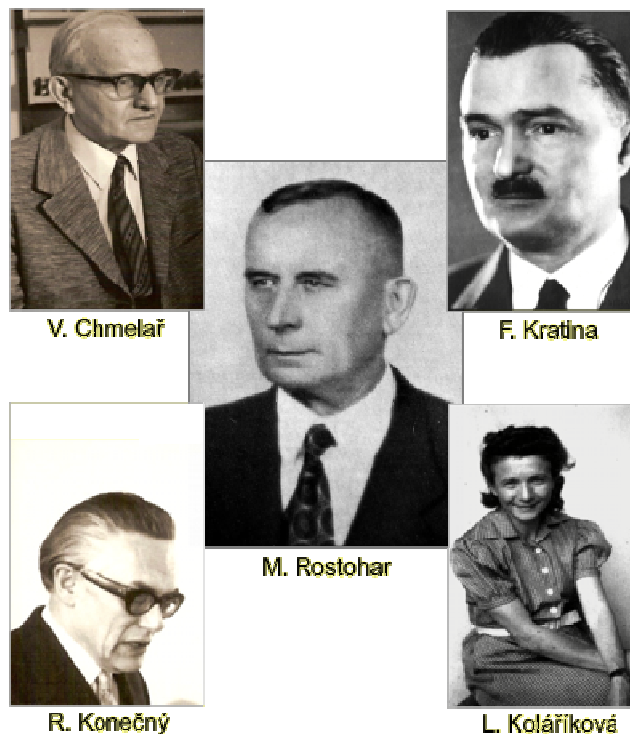
Rostohar studied medicine, natural sciences and psychology at university in Vienna, experimental psychology and epistemology at Graz and returned to Vienna, where he gained 1906 doctorate by submitting his dissertation dealing with the meaning of hypotheses „Ueber Hypothesen und ihre erkenntnistheoretische Bedeutung“. I had the opportunity to see in Vienna this dissertation typed and signed by Michael Rostohar. On the recommendation of professor F. Jodl, Rostohar habilitated in 1911 by professor Thomas G. Masaryk on the basis of the work „Theory of hypothetical judgement“. When the head of the institute at Charles University, a positivist philosopher and psychologist professor František Krejčí, showed little understanding for psychological experimentation, Rostohar created an experimental psychological laboratory from his own resources during the years 1911- 1912 under the aegis of professor František Mareš's Physiological institute. In 1924, Rostohar transferred his laboratory to Brno, where it became the basis for the Institute of Psychology. M. Rostohar lived and worked at a time, when many great and original psychological ideas appeared. It was the time of well-known pioneers such as Wilhelm Wundt, Carl Stumpf, Oswald Külpe, Karl Bühler, Alexius Meinong, Alfred Binet and many others; Rostohar visited some of them.

### **Peripeteias**

Looking at the years which were formative in Rostohar's decision to relocate to Brno, that is the years 1921 – 1923, then it can be seen that the impulse to leave Prague was undoubtedly motivated by the negative attitude of professor František Krejčí and his colleagues towards experimental psychology. It is worth noting that there is a certain analogy in the way that Wilhelm Wundt established his independent Psychology Institute in Leipzig, and Rostohar's course in Brno; with both there was a transitional phase of physiology and philosophy. Rostohar started in Brno in 1923 as an assistant to professor Babák at the physiological institute of the Medical Faculty at Masaryk University; from 1924 he worked as an associate professor in systematic philosophy, before being named to the chair of Psychology at Masaryk University in 1931. Meanwhile in 1926 he succeeded in establishing the Institute of Psychology at the Faculty of Arts, which was in the competence of the rector Edward Babák, even though the prime mover in its establishment was indubitably Rostohar himself.

Without an examination of the original documents, it would be easy for those interested in the history of Czech psychology to come to the conclusion at this distance in time that it was a conflict of opposing theoretical standpoints, as is so often the case in science. It is important to stress, however, that the polemics attendant on the beginnings of the Brno institute have a much wider cultural and ethical dimension. In the postscript to his translation of R. Müller-Freinfels's book (1937), Rostohar's assistant Robert Konečný states that the conflict between F. Krejčí and F. Mareš about approaches to psychology was the most controversial in the history of Czech psychology. In reality, this long-running disagreement had a wide reach and marked Czech cultural life, as can be seen from the fact that Arne Novák, a professor of literature at Masaryk University, also took a position on it. While Václav Příhoda, a supporter of Krejčí, was convinced that Krejčí had won the dispute, Novák stated that Krejčí had not always succeeded in overturning the arguments of his opponent. It was a remarkable note if Konečný saw an analogy with the controversy between Dilthey and Ebbinghaus. It can be seen as analogous, however, if we know that Dilthey had his roots in philosophy and Mareš in physiology, and that Ebbinghaus, in contrast to Krejčí, was an indefatigable experimentalist. In addition to this, in interpreting the duel between Mareš and Krejčí, two additional standpoints must be added, those of Babák and Rostohar, both critics of Krejčí's positivism.

Main figures in the Brno School of Psychology (Fig. 1)



The Brno Institute of Psychology provided a wide-ranging curriculum, work experience in the spheres of education, counseling and industry, and from 1935 a group of colleagues also formed around the Journal of Psychology, the first Czech journal, which was founded and edited by Rostohar in Brno. Among its contributors were V. Chmelař, F. Kratina, R. Konečný, L. Kolářiková, J. Uher, O. Glos, V. Komárek, E. Pejhovský, J. Burjáněk, and J. Vaněk. There were differences of opinion, but this did not inhibit the creative assertion of the work of each individual. Rostohar and Chmelař to a certain extent agreed on the emphasis on experimental methods, which both developed creatively in research and teaching, but differed in their conception of the subject of psychology. V. Chmelař, the second man of the School, avoided grand theories. This could be due to a personal tendency, but also because of the influence of professor Krejčí's positivism, as he studied with him after the war. Kratina shared with Rostohar a main interest in Ganzheit and Gestalt theory, but differed in a range of structural aspects, where Kratina's formulations were generally more precise. It can be imagined that Kratina's conviction, that instruments had no place in the examination of children, may have irritated Rostohar and Chmelař. R. Konečný was involved in several areas; he could certainly discuss dreams in Zeyer with F. Kratina, but a mutual topic of discussion with Rostohar from 1945 would have been the themes of logic and epistemology, and these topics were his main duty at the Philosophical Faculty. E. Pejhovský, a young assistant, felt honored that Rostohar had entrusted him with work on drawing up the headwords for the Pedagogical Encyclopedia, which was edited by J. Uher. Many of these psychological headwords were polished by F. Kratina.

### **The period of 1945-1948**

After the Second World War, life at the faculty and at the psychological institute quickly returned to normal with diligent work of the students and teachers, many of whom had waited several years for the reopening of the university; some of them had been used as forced labor (Totaleinsatz) by the Nazi regime. After the communist putsch of February 1948 however, relationships at the faculty started to change. Several of Rostohar's students emigrated, others were sent down after the vetting of 1949 (on the basis of students' committees made up of fresh party supporters). They were expelled for political, religious or other reasons (for example one student was removed for the "Western" theme of his dissertation, as it was based on results of Rorschach tests). Tito Street, along which Professor Rostohar walked to the faculty, was renamed Gorkij Street. When Rostohar refused to join the international communist resolution against Tito's Yugoslavia, he was moved to the neighboring position. But meanwhile he devoted his time to the creation of the psychological institute at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana, where he worked for more than 10 years. If we designate the first period of Rostohar's creative process as his own experimentation in the laboratory in Prague before the First World War and as the second, the creation of the Psychological Institute in Brno, then this was his greatest achievement. In the inter-war period the Brno psychology school attained the levels of the most prestigious European universities in terms of the originality of the theoretical concepts and instrumentation, and a wide range of practical contacts with several academic institutions.

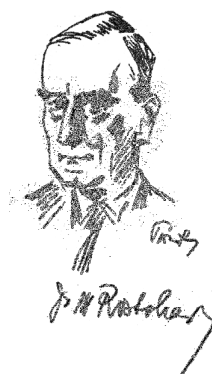
Ideological limitations on the growth of psychology were palpable in the totalitarian period from 1948 – 1965. The Institute gained a certain degree of prestige, when it undertook the translation of I. P. Pavlov's works. In addition, Professor Chmelař, who had taken over the chair of the Institute after M. Rostohar's departure in 1948, was always extremely careful and often prepared to compromise. During his headship there were several changes in the structure of the Institute. Within ideological limits, further stages of Brno psychology were developed, which could hardly be called continuations of the line of the Rostohar's school. Unfortunately, this promising post-war beginning was nipped in the bud by the Communist seizure of power in February 1948. For 40 years the Czech and Slovak spirit was enslaved to Communist hierarchy and aristocracy. Relations with Western psychology were very limited. Marxism provided a ready-made scheme and directives both for explanation and evaluation. The monograph *Psychology as a science of subjective reality* by M. Rostohar (1950) was condemned as a dangerous support of subjectivism. The publishing of papers of some non-Marxists was strictly forbidden. But a large proportion of Brno psychologists were not Communists. The Communist professors and directors of institutes were generally not real scholars. Some of them were propagandists of Marxist ideology under scientific guise. They promoted into scholarly positions without having had to meet necessary scientific requirements. In contrast to these rulers, several scholars lost their position in psychology. The others lost face. There was no possibility to continue the tradition which influenced the course of psychology in the 1930s and after the World War II.

After the Prague Spring 1968 some positive changes appeared. Robert Konečný (1906-1981), the third man of the School, former assistant to M. Rostohar and eminent clinical psychologist, assumed the chairmanship of the Department of Psychology. Only two years later, however, he felt the necessity to resign his post. The ideal of „a socialism with a human face“ was violently suppressed after the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. Because of early hostile and antagonistic attitudes toward psychology the chair of psychology at the University (meantime renamed the J. E. Purkinje University) was suspended from 1970 to 1974. Several members of the staff had to leave the University. 1974-89 the so-called era of “normalization” (an euphemism for tough measures taken to correct the ‘deviate ideas’ of Socialism with a Human Face). The dramatic events in November 1989 aroused Czech and Slovak human solidarity and assertiveness in the course of the soft, “Velvet Revolution”. The resurrected democracy makes possible looking to the hopeful future in education, research and practice of psychology. Cooperative arrangements with psychologists outside of the country are necessary. The isolation in which psychologists in Brno worked was serious, stronger than in Prague. Moravian cultural tradition which dates back to the beginnings of Christianity and has consistently upheld the ideals of humanity of Comenius and Masaryk should mark further development of psychology at the rehabilitated Masaryk University in 1990s.

In the period between First and Second World War the History of Psychology was not taught. But as far as back from 1945, Ludmila Kolářiková started to lecture on Aristotle's psychology; her lectures were based on two excellent translations in Czech: of Platon's papers by František Novotný, a professor of Masaryk University, and of the whole Aristotle's work by Antonín Kříž, a Brno grammar school teacher. In 1960s the History of Psychology became course. Recommended were Soviet textbooks by M. G. Jaroševskij. So, it was an unprecedented success if the translated article by D. O. Hebb (1967) on American revolution was accepted for publication. In a Soviet-dominated world was forbidden fruit. Specific historiographical conception represents later a textbook by J. Švancara (1993) on the origins and system transformations in the development of scientific psychology.

The primary purpose of teaching the History of Psychology (Hoskovcová at al, 2010) is an understanding the development of psychological thinking from ancient era to today. Main emphasis in doing so is on genesis of scientific psychology. In contrast to the textbooks, whose syllabus creates “key thinkers” only, it gradually evaluates idea sources, paradigms and main methods of single psychological streams and schools, leading to broader historiographical considerations. Special attention is devoted to development of Czech psychology and Brno School of Psychology specifics. The contribution and influences of Russian (J. Švancara, 1977), German (R. Konečný, in Müller-Freienfels, 1937), Swiss (J. Švancara, L. Švancarová, 1995), Polish (K. Plocek in Švancara, 1993) and American Psychology schools (Hebb, 1967) are subject in a variety of papers by Brno psychologists, including psychology in Nazi Germany (J. Švancara, 1993) and in the Soviet Union (Smékal, 1993; Švancara, 1997).

Mihajlo Rostohar. Fig. 2. (The artist is unknown)



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