

## To the Roots of Women's Education in the Bohemian Lands



**Milada Sekyrková (ed.), *Minerva 1890–1936. Kronika prvního dívčího gymnázia v habsburské monarchii*, Prague: Karolinum, 402 pp.**

Following a worldwide trend in historiography, recent decades have seen a surge of interest in the history of Czech women. After being left on the margins of academic research, the focus turns mostly on the aspects of women's history crucial for the feminism, in comparison with other parts of the Habsburg monarchy developed early. Following more broadly conceived works documenting the development of women's political, economical and societal status and, more recently, women's experience, of equal importance is publications dedicated to particular institutions and personalities of feminist movement.

The book „*Minerva 1890–1936. Kronika prvního dívčího gymnázia v habsburské monarchii* [*Minerva 1890–1936. The annals of the first girls' grammar school in the Habsburg monarchy*] is an edited transcription of an important resource for studying a history of women's education in the Lands of the Bohemian Crown, the annals of the first Czech women's grammar school.<sup>1</sup> *Minerva*, the first women's grammar school in the Central Europe, was founded after several unsuccessful attempts by the Women's Manufacturing Association, the founding committee included well-known names of the Czech women's movement like Karolína Světlá and Eliška Krásnohorská. The time period of the early 1890s was not particularly forthcoming to the matters of girls' education — neither Czech nor German university allowed women to be enrolled as official students and none of the existing women's higher education institutions were licensed to issue a *maturita* certificate which was an obligatory prerequisite for university enrolment. The struggle to get women's education acknowledged as equal in importance as men's was a distinctive issue in the first decades of *Minerva's* existence.

Despite its significance, so far there has been no singular publication dedicated to *Minerva*. The context in which the annals are meant to be read and understood is provided by the introduction. It includes a short overview of the general history of women's education in the Bohemian lands, a recount of previous efforts in establishing an accredited institution for higher education of women and mentions of notable founders and graduates of *Minerva*. The introduction is by no means exhaustive; previous knowledge of Czech women's history is advantageous, as the text often uses terms without comprehensive explanation, e.g. differences between various types of contemporary higher education. Despite this fact, it serves as the unique compact outline of *Minerva's* establishment, development, significance and legacy set in the social and political background of the fin-de-siècle and interwar Bohemia. Hitherto uncited documents of the provenance of the Prague City Archives and the Charles

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the originally British term *grammar school* seems like the closest term to specific Czech *gymnázium*, which was used to label an institution of higher education, whose primary purpose was to prepare students for continuing their studies on a university.



University Archives also offer new factual information as well as possibly new interpretations and differ significantly from the sources of personal nature that have dominated the research. The appendix includes a comprehensive and helpful name register with a glossary and the table containing the numbers of Minerva's students throughout the years and an overview of its directors. A valuable part of the publication is a photography appendix which brings the reader the view of selected pages of the annals, the buildings in which school's education took place and teaching staff.

Even though the annals themselves are not an engaging read, keeping to firm, consistent structure and offering only curt information sparse of any personal input or assessment, nevertheless they are a valuable source of information concerning the institutional background of Minerva. In addition, for a reader with sufficient prior knowledge of the context and skilled in reading comprehension it also serves as an overview of overtime changes in education system and approach as well as reflections of social and political changes in turbulent decades the annals cover in the choices of subjects taught or memorable days celebrated. For instance, the general public's opinion on the matters of women's higher education and their role in public space is easily discernible. For example, on p. 41 there is a short, but telling recount of incident, when the school was forced to avoiding collective attendance in the Sunday Masses and even the important Corpus Christi Mass because of rising number of negative reactions from (predominantly male) church visitors, leading to cancelling collective attendance (common for boys' higher schools) and encouraging individual attendance with family members. Considering the span of years covered by the annals, it is possible to trace the transformations of public's stance on women's education and role on the job market through the decades. The learning conception was also changing accordingly to societal demand; while in the first years the curriculum was focused exclusively on knowledge and skills necessary for university enrolment (ancient Latin and Greek) and distributed to significantly shorter time than the curriculum for boys' higher schools with underlined intention to prove girls were equally capable of obtaining higher education, in the interwar period the subjects teaching more marketable skills, like wide variety of living languages, shorthand and even handicrafts and needlework, are taught to satisfy higher demand for women employable in administration and state service jobs without a university degree.

As I have already suggested, the publication of the annals of the Minerva grammar school brings forward an important source document not only for the research of the modern history of women's education in the Bohemian lands, but also for the general research of the women's history and social history of covered period. While it is certainly not an introductory publication and rather extensive previous knowledge on the topic is recommended, both the introduction by the editor Milada Sekyrková and the transcription of annals are valuable contributions to the current research in the field of Czech women's history.

**Michaela Smidová**