

TRANSFORMATIONS OF RAILWAY STATION SERVICES AS EXEMPLIFIED BY STATION RESTAURANTS¹

IVAN JAKUBEC – JAN ŠTEMBERK

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The aim of the paper is to map the development of station restaurants in the Czech lands from the beginning of railway transport to the second half of the 20th century. Our goal is not to provide an exhaustive description of individual restaurants, which would be significantly beyond the scope of this article, nor to focus on specific locations. On the contrary, we want to focus on station restaurants from the point of view of changes in their operation, management, guests and services. This topic has not yet been sufficiently developed. The text is primarily based on the analysis of archival sources in Czech, Austrian and partly Slovak archives and supplemented by the views of contemporary newspapers and magazines. The text traces the reasons for the emergence of station restaurants, which built a very good reputation during the second half of the 19th century and became centres of modern gastronomy. The station restaurants were not operated directly by the railway administration, but were rented to experienced innkeepers. The chosen rental model, taking into account the professional qualities of the entrepreneur in the first place, contributed to building the reputation of station restaurants. Maintaining a high level of station restaurants was also helped by a certain design unity in the facilities. This created the impression of a unified network of quality catering establishments. Station restaurants reached a golden era at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The impetus for the changes was the emergence of dining cars and changes in the concept of timetables reflecting the acceleration of transport. In the interwar period, the popularity of buffets offering quick and easy refreshments grew. In the post-war period, consistent socialization began, which, however, did not bring an increase in the quality of services, but rather their decline. Station restaurants gained a folk character.

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Introduction

For its time, the railway provided a fast, comfortable and cheap mass transit option for people. Its advantages were especially manifest when travelling over longer distances. On long journeys, however, passengers needed refreshment. Prior to the advent of the railway, post-chaise passenger transport faced a similar issue. Passengers in postal coaches needed to satisfy their hunger and thirst, and this gave rise to coach houses offering refreshments at transfer stations. The railways, which replaced road transport in long-distance transport during the 19th century, thus drew inspiration from this system and gradually station restaurants took over the role coach houses had previously played.

Our article will focus on mapping the development of station restaurants in the Czech lands from the beginnings of railway transport to the latter half of the 20th century. Our goal is not to provide an exhaustive description of individual restaurants, which would significantly exceed the scope of this article, nor to focus on specific locations where this topic has already been studied.² On the contrary, we want to focus on station restaurants from the perspective of their operation, management, guests and services. This topic has not yet been sufficiently developed. The text is based on an analysis of archival sources and supplemented with perspectives from the contemporary press.

The Beginnings of Railway Dining

The oldest railway station restaurant in Central Europe was established in the Upper Austrian village of Kerschbaum on the Linz – České Budějovice horse-drawn railway, just a short distance from the Czech border. The timetable was set so that at lunchtime, trains departing from the terminal stations in the morning would cross paths at this station. This provided a suitable opportunity to have a snack before the next journey, which the timetable also took into account. Czech historian Konstantin Jireček wrote in his memoirs that the lunch served at a long table covered with a white tablecloth was “quite good”.³

Station inns became a common service provided at major railway stations meeting the conditions for their establishment. Traditionally, they were part of the originating and terminal stations. Gradually, they were added to stations at railway junctions and places where greater traffic was anticipated (spas, resorts). We often come across restaurants incorporated into plans for station buildings. If the need for a station restaurant arose later (construction of a branch line, etc.), it became part of the station reconstruction plan or was simply an addition.

2 With a focus on Prague, for example: MUSIL. *Vůně pražských nádraží*. Praha 2005.

3 HAVRÁNEK. Jízda koněspřežní železnicí z Českých Budějovic do Lince (Z deníku čtrnáctiletého Konstantina Jirečka). In N. N. *Práce na dějinách dopravy*. Praha 1986, p. 115.

The principles for the functional amenities of railway stations published in 1838 already included spaces for passengers to sojourn with reasonable comfort according to car classes.⁴ It was the scope of this comfort and the convenience provided became the reason for dividing the space of waiting rooms and station restaurants up until the latter half of the 20th century. In the 19th century, it was common to combine the station restaurant with the waiting room. The stay in the waiting room could thus be made more pleasant with refreshments. Like the waiting rooms, the spaces of station restaurants were also divided according to classes. The spaces of the 1st and 2nd class restaurants were usually connected, and for the holders of 1st class tickets, of which there were never many, there were special lounges, ensuring privacy and comfort. The 3rd class restaurant, intended for the widest classes of passengers, resembled the aforementioned coach house.⁵

The designation “station restaurant” did not require being located directly in the station building. Depending on operating possibilities at stations, restaurants might be located next to the actual station building. This situation was common on the Kaiser Ferdinand Nordbahn. These station inns were run by entrepreneurial families from the surrounding area. The fact that station restaurants were also established outside the station was not necessarily associated with just the early phase of railway development (e.g. in the mid-1870s in Broumov). In connection with striving to increase passenger comfort, there was a noticeable effort to bring the restaurant premises as close as possible to the platforms. Such a location allowed for faster meals, as the passenger did not have to leave the station. The station was a place of heightened passenger traffic and ensured a sufficient number of diners. Similar to Kerschbaum, some stations (Česká Třebová, Přerov, Gmünd /České Velenice/) were outright intended for passenger dining. The timetable also took into account a longer layover at these stations. Improvement in passenger services was reflected in the possibility of ordering food and drinks in advance and thus speeding up service. The passenger would select refreshments from a menu available on the train and give the order to the conductor, who would then arrange sending the order from a way station by telegraph to the station and its delivery to the station restaurant. The passenger would thus have a prepared meal waiting for him immediately upon arrival. From the late 1870s, pubs and lunch counters begin to appear at railway stations as places for fast refreshment with a limited range of food. In larger railway stations, kitchen operations including storage areas were located in building basements.⁶

4 N.N. Ueber Depots und Sammelplätze für Waaren und Reisende (Stazionsplätze) bei Eisenbahnen. In *Allgemeine Bauzeitung*, 1838, Vol. 3, no. 19, p. 163.

5 MUSIL, *Vůně pražských nádraží*, p. 84.

6 KREJČÍŘÍK. *Česká nádraží (Architektura a stavební vývoj)*. Vol. I. Litoměřice 2003, s. 10.

It was not even unusual for station restaurants to move within the station, usually due to the need to expand serving rooms. In some cases, this was also solved by completing new wings of the station (e.g. today's Masaryk Station in Prague). Restaurants were also kept in mind during station reconstructions. During the construction of the joint station of the Staats-Eisenbahngesellschaft and the Süd-Norddeutsche Verbindungsbahn in Pardubice in 1857 and 1858, the space of the station restaurant was significantly expanded. It consisted of a dining hall, lunch counter, kitchen and the restaurateur's apartment. Storage space was planned in the basement. The restaurant in the original building had just been a kitchen with a dining room, which was still directly connected to the waiting room.⁷

Restaurant Operation

From the beginning of railway operations in the Czech lands, it became a rule that restaurants were not operated by the railway administration, but by a third party on the basis of a contract. In the case of restaurant operations located directly in station buildings, a lease system was applied. Station restaurants offered a very attractive place to do business, which was sought after by restaurant operators. Potential customer traffic at a railway station was incomparably higher than and the rent was usually comparable with, other locations in the city. In the latter half of the 19th century, we regularly encounter offers to lease station restaurants in newspaper advertising columns. Restaurant lease tenders usually attracted numerous interested parties from which it was necessary to choose. In the era of private railway companies, the selection of tenants was their internal matter. Criticism of the selection of station restaurateurs in the Czech lands was mainly based on their national orientation, lack of knowledge of Czech and preference for tenants of German nationality.

According to the Trade Licensing Code (Patent No. 229/1859, Imperial Code § 16), the catering business was a licensed trade. The tenant had to obtain a license before opening. If he or she could prove a lease, they were generally granted a license. Taking into consideration the interests of travelers, decisions on licenses were to be made as quickly as possible so that the restaurant would not be closed for a long time.

From the perspective of railway companies and later also state railways, many restaurants were being leased under similar conditions. The concluded contracts became mere forms consisting of general business terms and conditions, on

7 Oesterreichisches Staatsarchiv (OeStA), Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv (AVA), fund (f.) Süd-Norddeutsche Verbindungsbahn und Österreichische Nordwestbahn (SNDVB and ÖNWB), box (b.). 130, number (no.) E VI/8, Löbliche Direction der Süd-Norddeutschen Verbindungsbahn 19. 11. 1858.

which only the names of the tenants and the location of the leased restaurant changed. Other provisions regarding operating hours, the scope of the minimum offer of food and drinks, the furnishing of the establishments, the pricing policies, but also the minimum temperatures were standard for the station restaurants of the entire railway company.⁸ This also created a certain corporate brand. The individual restaurants were similar to each other and the passenger could expect a similar standard of services provided.

The conditions for restaurateurs of the Österreichische Nordwestbahn at the turn of the 1860s and 1870s stipulated that the restaurant furnishings were to be provided by the landlord and that the tenant was not allowed to place any additional furniture in the restaurant without the landlord's consent. The restaurateur was also limited in the choice of plates, cutlery and other tableware which depended on the railway company's consent. This was to ensure design uniformity. It went without saying that all equipment had to be kept in good condition. The tenant could be asked to set up and maintain toilets for the restaurant guests at his own expense. If there were suitable spaces available in the building, he could also be allowed to operate a hotel. In order for the railway company to have feedback from guests, the restaurateur was required to have a complaints book placed in an easily accessible place (§ 9). The railway company was also responsible for deciding on smoking areas in restaurants (§ 13). The obligation to clean the premises daily, properly light and heat them (§ 20) was also stipulated in detail. The temperature was to be between 17.5 and 20 °C and the lighting was to be of such intensity that it was possible to read at each table designated for guests. The opening hours had to be adapted to the train timetable and approved by the railway company. The food and drinks served had to be of good quality. The prices had to be approved in advance by the railway company. The restaurateur was explicitly ordered to serve properly chilled beer in the summer months. The restaurateur could distribute food and drinks around the station (platforms and carriages) or sell tobacco products only with special permission.⁹

The nationalization of the railway companies naturally also affected the station restaurants. The Austrian Railways adopted the previous model of leasing station restaurants and the general contractual terms and conditions forming the basis of the lease agreements. The responsibility for leasing was entrusted to the individual directorates of the state railways. At first glance, it seemed nothing had changed. The station restaurant's fit-out, including the kitchen, continued to be provided by the railway administration itself. The railway thus

8 OeStA, AVA, f. SNDVB and ÖNWB, b. 130, no. E VI/8, Bedingniss-Heft für den Betrieb der Restaurationen.

9 OeStA, AVA, f. SNDVB and ÖNWB, b. 130, no. E VI/8, Bedingniss-Heft für den Betrieb der Restaurationen.

preserved the uniform character of the station. It decided on the arrangement of tables and the overall appearance of the establishment. The restaurateur was therefore not able to decide on the design of chairs, tables, lighting fixtures, etc. himself. Repairs to the restaurant's equipment and furnishings were authorized by the railway administration. The restaurateur was obliged to maintain this equipment in good order. The lessee was obliged to buy the tableware, cutlery, glasses, table linen, etc., and, at important stations, also special sets for guests from the highest aristocratic circles himself, while being required to keep to the guidelines of standard patterns issued by the railway administration. The general conditions slowly expanded, and other conditions were added, such as providing food and drink to railway employees at overhead prices, the sale of postage stamps, envelopes and correspondence cards. The railroad administration also made decisions about the newspapers and magazines that could be set out in the restaurant for the guests to pass the time.¹⁰ The station restaurateurs' own assessment is interesting. They pointed out that business was better in the days of private railway companies. They argued for lower rents and a more accommodating attitude. They considered the state-owned company to be ossified and communication to be protracted. They also criticized the new terms of the lease agreements, which required discounts on food and beverages for railway employees.¹¹

In the rules for the lease of station restaurants issued by the Austrian Ministry of Railways, it was emphasized that the primary purpose of station restaurants is to benefit passengers. They should offer good and cheap food and drinks. Profit for the railway administration was secondary. The competence and experience of the tenderer was more important than the amount of rent offered. Important also was the emphasis that the lease was to be granted by public tender, but the option to lease to a specific person was retained. The Director of State Railways decided on the procedure in specific cases.¹² It must be noted, however, that the same role was attributed to the station restaurants by Zdenko Kuttig, Director of Operations of the Emperor Ferdinand Northern Railway. He stressed that the main task of station restaurants was to refresh passengers and make journeys more pleasant and not to make money for the company.¹³

10 Národní archiv (NA), f. Ministerstvo železnic (MŽ) I, b. 40, no. 1535/1933, Všeobecné podmínky pro smlouvy o pronájmu nádražních hostinců (bufetů) na stanicích československých státních drah.

11 N. N. Nach der Verstaatlichung. In *Zeitschrift des Verbandes der österreichischen Bahnhofs-Restauratere*, 1911, y. 1, no. 12, p. 2.

12 N. N. Zadávání nádražních restaurací. In *Moravský živnostník*, 1908, Vol. 8, 1908, no. 22, 30. 5. 1908, p. 4.

13 N. N. Nach der Verstaatlichung. In *Zeitschrift des Verbandes der österreichischen Bahnhofs-Restauratere*, 1911, Vol. 1, no. 12, p. 2.

The railway company maintained oversight of operations and offerings for customers throughout the entire duration of the lease. Criticism regarding the quality and selection of food served could be grounds for terminating the lease agreement. Lease contracts were concluded for an indefinite period with the option of unilateral termination. The standard of services provided was monitored by both the station and railway management, who often used station restaurants for meals during their travels, as well as by travelers themselves, who could leave their comments in complaint books. Station restaurants at major train stations offered beer from renowned breweries, supplemented by beers brewed locally. The Northern Railway of Emperor Ferdinand directly specified to restaurateurs which beer was to be served. At smaller stations, it was common to sell beer from nearby breweries. During the interwar period, local breweries actively sought leases of station restaurants. They also sought to increase their sales by providing other leaseholders with benefits in the form of providing necessary bar equipment (counter, tap, compressor, cooling systems, etc.).¹⁴ The railway administration could directly influence the restaurant's offerings even during the lease term. Criticism of the lack of non-alcoholic beverages and pressure from the agricultural lobby led the Cisleithanian (Austrian) Ministry of Railways in 1904 to mandate that station restaurants ensure the availability of milk and dairy products for travelers.

After the nationalization of the railways at the end of the 19th century, the awarding of leases also came under increased scrutiny by the press. Nationalist criticism grew stronger, particularly regarding the preference for German tenants who did not speak Czech – even in the Czech midland provinces. The internal language of the railway system in Cisleithania was German (per the Ministry of Trade regulation no. 103/1884 Imperial Code), but when dealing with passengers, the languages commonly used in the given area were to be employed. In the Czech interior, even the bilingual (Czech-German) announcements of beer and sausage offers on the platforms stirred discontent.¹⁵

After the establishment of Czechoslovakia, the situation changed. Together with Czech railway personnel, Czech restaurateurs began expanding into border regions. Favoritism toward participants in the fight for statehood (such as legionnaires) and war veterans was also evident in the leasing of railway station restaurants. Many of the new tenants in the border areas were former legionnaires. The fact that this was a political policy is evidenced by the Ministry of Railways itself, which showed willingness to accommodate these legionnaires (e.g., by offering rent discounts or overlooking limited professional experience). It argued

14 Státní oblastní archiv v Hradci Králové (SOA Hradec Králové), Archivní oddělení Hradec Králové (AO H. Králové), f. Akciový pivovar a sladovna v Hořicích, b. 23, no. 2 II/3, 2 II/4.

15 N. N. Čestina na dráze. In *Národní listy*, 1898, Vol. 38, no. 224, 16. 8. 1898, p. 3.

for their national contribution to the bohemianization of the area and the difficult business conditions that brought rejection by the local German population. This also applied to the spa town of Karlovy Vary. The station restaurant was acquired in 1924 by the legionnaire František Kafka. Despite frequent complaints about the quality of the food and its overpricing, the Czechoslovak State Railways (ČSD) supported it. Although they were aware of the poor management that did not meet the needs of the spa town, they were willing to turn a blind eye to these shortcomings.¹⁶ After the ceding of the border area to Germany, based on the Munich Agreement, Czech tenants had to once again withdraw from the border region. This was, incidentally, the case of Josef Šiška at the railway station in Špičák in South Bohemia.¹⁷

During World War I, investments nearly came to a halt. By the early 1920s, the inventory could at best be described as maintained – though often it was worn out. The same trend continued in the postwar period. Worn-down floors, burnt-out stoves, and deteriorated furnishings were the norm. The furniture (chairs, tables, etc.) provided by the railway administration was also heavily worn. The railways lacked the funds to purchase new furnishings. Restaurateurs themselves were aware that a “shabby” restaurant space was unappealing to guests, so they began investing in dining room furnishings and kitchen equipment out of their own pockets. However, if a lease agreement was terminated, they risked losing the money they had invested. According to the General Terms and Conditions for Railway Station Restaurant Lease Agreements, issued after the founding of the ČSD, contracts continued to be signed for an indefinite period, and the railway administration retained the right to terminate any lease without cause, with six months’ notice. Under such conditions, major investments became risky.

Restaurateurs appealed to the ČSD, proposing that they would be willing to make investments if they were granted contracts that could not be terminated for a set period of time, thereby providing some business security. In November 1926, the administrative board of the Ministry of Railways approved that in exceptional cases – when restaurateurs had “*proven themselves extraordinarily well*” and committed to making substantial investments in the appearance and equipment of their establishments – a clause could be included in the lease agreement stating that it could not be terminated by ČSD for a period of up to five years.¹⁸ The first lease agreement of this kind was concluded with restaurateur František Paplhán, who from 1919 ran the station restaurant at Prague’s Masaryk Station, which he significantly modernized.¹⁹ In 1931, to defend the interests of

16 NA, f. MŽ I, b. 1372, no. 41940/1927.

17 NA, f. Ministerstvo dopravy (MD) I, b. 169, Nádražní restaurace na Špičáku, 17. 5. 1946.

18 NA, f. MŽ I, b. 1372, no. 54076/1926.

19 NA, f. MŽ I, b. 1372, no. 47139/1926.

railway station restaurateurs, František Paplhán founded the Union of Railway Station Restaurateurs in the Czechoslovak Republic.²⁰

In accordance with the *General Terms and Conditions for Railway Station Restaurant Lease Agreements*, the ČSD were to continue providing the furniture for dining areas intended for passengers, “*in such a manner and quantity as it deems appropriate, including the arrangement of these items; the station restaurateur may not, without special permission from the state railway administration, install other furniture or alter its arrangement.*” All other equipment necessary for operating the restaurant – or for any rented rooms – had to be provided at the tenant’s own expense, but “*in such quantity as the state railway administration, at its sole discretion, deems necessary.*”²¹ The restaurateur was required to keep the equipment provided by the railway administration in good condition. If the items became too worn to be used, the restaurateur was obligated to replace them at their own expense, following the instructions of the state railway directorate and using the prescribed types. However, the reality was different. Increasingly, the railway administration stopped supplying any equipment at all. What remained was often heavily worn, and in order to maintain a pleasant environment, restaurateurs preferred to provide their own furnishings. By the late 1930s, the Hradec Králové railway directorate even considered the effort to enforce standardized furnishings in railway station restaurants an excessive interference in the tenant’s business operations.²²

The *General Terms and Conditions* also included other provisions for the comfort of passengers. Restaurant and waiting room areas had to be open and heated to at least 16°C (about 61°F) at least one hour before the arrival and departure of the first train. With the stationmaster’s approval, the restaurateur could choose to operate around the clock. Cleaning was required regularly after closing hours, or – in the case of 24-hour operations – during times when the fewest travelers were present.

The conditions also opened the door to modernization. While they didn’t prioritize specific rules on how heating or lighting should be provided, they granted the railway administration the right to take over heating and lighting at any time in exchange for a flat-rate compensation. During the interwar period, traditional stoves at railway stations were gradually replaced with central heating. The same applied to the introduction of electric lighting, which was

20 Archiv hlavního města Prahy (AHMP), f. Magistrát hl. m. Prahy II – Spolkový katastr, b. 308, no. VIII/719.

21 NA, f. MŽ I, b. 40, no. 1535/1933, Všeobecné podmínky pro smlouvy o pronájmu nádražních hostinců (bufetů) na stanicích československých státních drah, art. 6.

22 NA, f. MD I, b. 189, no. 12170/1938, Všeobecné podmínky pro smlouvy o pronájmu nádražních hostinců (bufetů) na stanicích československých státních drah, nové vydání, 16. 3. 1938.

implemented in connection with the country's broader electrification efforts. The use of running water was also mandated, provided that plumbing had been installed.²³

Frequent and justified complaints "*about the poor quality or insufficient quantity of food and drinks served, or about poor service*" were a valid reason for terminating the lease. Failure to observe opening hours could have the same consequences.²⁴

Restaurateurs had no freedom when it came to their offerings or pricing policy. The prices of meals offered had to align with the local standard and be approved by the district office. The railway administration also monitored price levels. In the 1930s, a trend emerged of offering set menus at more favorable prices.

Czech restaurateurs were active not only at railway stations in the Czech borderlands (the Sudetenland) but also expanded into Slovakia. This too sparked critical reactions. However, it's important to note that many railway station restaurants (such as in Kysak) were significantly improved under Czech restaurateurs and earned a very good reputation as a result.²⁵

The economic crisis of the 1930s had a significant impact on the operation of railway station restaurants. In the most affected industrial areas, the number of customers fell by as much as half. This led to increasingly vocal demands for rent reductions.²⁶ The rent was set at the beginning of the relationship and could subsequently be adjusted upwards or downwards depending on the financial results. According to the internal rules of ČSD, it was to depend on the gross income achieved (4 to 8%). The prosperity of the enterprise thus influenced the amount of the rent.²⁷ During the accelerating interwar period, fast food stands were gaining popularity. Mainly at the initiative of nearby breweries, various restaurant extensions were built in places where there had been no restaurant before, but the changing traffic patterns of passengers justified the construction. These were simple buildings without high demands on comfort.²⁸

The war also affected station restaurants. At the beginning of the occupation, there were 117 station restaurants and 84 buffets in operation in the Protectorate,

23 NA, f. MŽ I, b. 40, no. 1535/1933, Všeobecné podmínky pro smlouvy o pronájmu nádražních hostinců (bufetů) na stanicích československých státních drah, art. 6.

24 Ibid.

25 Slovenský národný archív (SNA), f. Ministerstvo dopravy a verejných prác (nespracované), Arizácia českých reštauračných podnikov; SABOL. Revolúcia v priestorovej mobilite. In *Dva režimy jednej krajiny*. Bratislava 2017, pp. 166-167.

26 N. N. Nádražní restauratři domáhají se snížení nájemného. In *Český Lloyd*, 1933, Vol. 49, no. 33, 22. 4. 1933, p. 1.

27 NA, f. MD I, b. 184, no. E 16572/1945.

28 MUSIL, *Vůně pražských nádraží*, p. 103.

simpler establishments with a limited range of food.²⁹ The war brought the first wave of disruption and restrictions on restaurant rooms. The growing intensity of traffic led to increased space requirements at railway stations. The restaurateurs were benefited by Regulation No. 179/1939 Coll. prohibiting rent increases, which was valid throughout the occupation.³⁰ Station restaurants were subject to all the restrictions imposed on restaurateurs during the war economy (turning in of food stamps, meat-free days, etc.).³¹

Guests

The customers of railway station restaurants were primarily travelers. Over time, however, the idea of opening station restaurants to the general public gradually gained traction. In the second half of the 19th century and even into the first half of the 20th century, railway station restaurants had an excellent reputation and were often among the best dining establishments in town. The sections designated for first- and second-class passengers rivaled the restaurants of the most luxurious hotels. These spaces became sought-after venues, often carrying an air of exoticism due to their international clientele. They were also frequently the first place where foreign visitors encountered the city or country they were traveling to.

One of the most renowned was the restaurant at today's Prague Main Station, associated from the 1890s with František Zavřel and later his son Zdeněk. Also well regarded was Antonín Paplhán's restaurant at Prague's Masaryk Station and Jindřich Horák's establishment at Brno Main Station. Many travelers planned their trips with a visit to a station restaurant in mind – sometimes even making it the primary purpose of their stop.

By the early 20th century, however, station restaurateurs began voicing concerns about worsening conditions for running their businesses and a decline in guest numbers. They pointed out that long-distance trains were increasingly equipped with dining cars. Shorter transfer times and reduced train stop durations also posed challenges. Additionally, the growing prevalence of direct lines meant that passengers often had no reason to even step off the train at the station.³² To defend the interests of station restaurateurs, the Verband der österreichischen Bahnhofrestaureure (Association of Austrian Railway Station Restaurateurs) was founded in 1910. The association's first president was František Zavřel,

29 NA, f. MD I, b. 184, no. D 25108/1940.

30 NA, f. MD I, b. 184, no. E 16572/1945.

31 More detail on these restrictions: JAKUBEC and ŠTEMBERK. *Cestovní ruch pod dohledem třetí říše*. Praha 2018, pp. 114-135.

32 N. N. Bahnhofrestauration Oderberg. In *Zeitschrift des Verbandes der österreichischen Bahnhofs-Restauratere*, 1912, Vol. 2, no. 11, p. 2.

the tenant of the restaurant at Prague's Emperor Franz Joseph Station (today's Main Station).³³ The association also aimed to serve the traveling public. One particularly interesting idea was the introduction of a refundable beer mug system: a traveler could pay for a drink and a deposit, take the mug with them on the train, and return it at the next station to get their deposit back.³⁴

Railway workers themselves were also frequent guests at station restaurants. The nationalization of railway companies impacted their employees as well, turning them into civil servants. Station restaurateurs were newly required to offer benefits (discounts) to railway workers, on meals as well as accommodations. Station restaurants thus began to take on the role of staff Cafeterias for railway employees, who welcomed the perks. Under the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, restaurateurs were obligated to provide railway workers with meals and beverages at cost prices. The Czechoslovak State Railways (ČSD), in their lease conditions for station restaurants, required that restaurateurs offer railway employees and their family members a 25% discount on meals. If the restaurant also offered lodging, railway workers received a 50% discount on room rates.³⁵

In addition to running the restaurant itself, restaurateurs could also provide platform service – delivering food and drinks to passengers waiting on the platforms. In some cases, the railway administration could mandate this service if it deemed it appropriate. The usual offerings for this kind of service were beer and hotdogs.³⁶ Restaurateurs were required to clearly display the prices of all items sold near the trains. Naturally, this rule was often ignored, with excuses such as price tags being blown away by wind from arriving trains. At the fall 1925 meeting of the Czechoslovak Central Railway Council, a proposal was approved requiring that station restaurants offer non-alcoholic beverages (mineral water, sodas, and plain water in summer) to travelers in addition to alcoholic drinks. Reports from individual stations showed that demand for non-alcoholic drinks peaked in the summer months, while in winter, interest dropped significantly – so much so that many restaurateurs chose not to offer any beverages at the trains during that time. In the Hradec Králové region, there was even greater demand for fruit than for drinks.³⁷

33 N. N. Rückblick und Ausblick. In *Zeitschrift des Verbandes der österreichischen Bahnhofs-Restauratere*, 1911, Vol. 1, no. 11, p. 1.

34 N. N. Eine Neuerung für die Reisende. In *Zeitschrift des Verbandes der österreichischen Bahnhofs-Restauratere*, 1911, Vol. 1, no. 10, p. 9.

35 NA, f. MŽ I, b. 40, no. 1535/1933, Všeobecné podmínky pro smlouvy o pronájmu nádražních hostinců (bufetů) na stanicích československých státních drah.

36 *Ibid.*, art. 6.

37 NA, f. MŽ I, b. 452, Nádražní restaurace, obsluha cestujících u vlaků.

The serving of alcohol gradually became a topic of major debate. Alcohol-fueled passengers often behaved disruptively on trains, causing trouble for fellow travelers. A much bigger issue, however, was railway employees themselves, who frequently consumed alcohol on their way to or during work. Though service regulations prohibited drinking on duty, this did not stop the practice. As early as the interwar period, the Hradec Králové railway directorate proposed including a clause in station restaurant lease agreements that would ban restaurateurs from offering or serving alcohol – even beer – to railway employees. Instead, they were to have non-alcoholic drinks and, especially in winter, tea and coffee readily available for workers.³⁸ Excessive drinking could lead to accidents. Engineers were for a long time allowed to drink low-alcohol beer, considered refreshing on hot days, but other alcohol was off-limits. Particularly in the 1950s and early 1960s, drinking by railway staff became a serious problem – ironically taking place right in the station restaurants. One notorious incident occurred on May 28, 1953, near Starý Smokovec, where an entire train crew drank hard liquor in a station restaurant. The alcohol gave the train driver the false confidence to speed through a section of track not built for such velocity. The train derailed in a curve and overturned.³⁹

Similar incidents led to repeated proposals to ban alcohol sales in station restaurants, but such bans were never implemented. This also applied to stronger beers, which were often criticized during inspections focused on travel culture.⁴⁰ Act No. 120/1962 Coll., on Combating Alcoholism, prohibited alcohol consumption by individuals whose work required sobriety. It also forbade restaurateurs from serving alcohol to such individuals. Violations could result in fines or disciplinary action under § 11.

Adapting Station Restaurants to Socialism

The period following the end of World War II did not signal any major changes regarding railway station restaurants. The traditional leasing system continued as before. Czech restaurateurs began returning to the Czech and Moravian borderlands – initially as national administrators and later as leaseholders. The first signs of change appeared subtly. Among the applicants for restaurant leases, the *Masaryk Fund for Railway Employees* – a charitable support organization for railway workers – came onto the scene and began to gain influence.

38 NA, f. MD I, b. 189, no. 12170/1938, Všeobecné podmínky pro smlouvy o pronájmu nádražních hostinců (bufetů) na stanicích československých státních drah, nové vydání, 16. 3. 1938.

39 GULÍK jun. *Železničné nehody na Slovensku 2*. Corona 2011, p. 88.

40 Zemský archiv v Opavě (ZA Opava), f. Severomoravský krajský národní výbor Ostrava (Sm KNV Ostrava), b. 33, no. 112.

From its financial division, the *Railway Workers' Cooperative for Passenger Services* (Železničářské družstvo pro službu cestující veřejnosti) was established in 1946. This cooperative, closely connected to railway employees, quickly became a favored contender in lease competitions during the postwar economic transformation and the state's support of cooperative enterprise.

In May 1948, the *Railway Workers' Cooperative for Passenger Services* operated 25 railway station restaurants at major stations,⁴¹ with a gross turnover of 160 million Czechoslovak crowns. Czechoslovak State Railways (ČSD) and the cooperative were negotiating the cooperative's takeover of all supplementary station and onboard services (i.e., restrooms, washrooms, baggage porters, railway advertising, dining and sleeping cars, etc.).⁴² At the end of 1948, it was decided that the cooperative would not be nationalized and would be ordered to take over all ancillary (non-transport) services provided by the Czech Railways. During 1949, it was to take over all station restaurants and push private enterprise out of this sphere.⁴³ By the middle of that year, it was already operating 170.⁴⁴ A year later, the cooperative operated all station restaurants.⁴⁵

The *Railway Workers' Cooperative for Passenger Services*, from April 1949 known as the *Cooperative for the Traveling Public* (Družstvo cestující veřejnosti), actively engaged in the socialism reorientation of business associated with the railways of the Czech lands. It actively negotiated with existing tenants to take over their businesses. It used employee action committees to do this and, probably by a combination of pressure, limiting the supply of raw materials and promises for the future, persuaded the restaurateur to cooperate and join the cooperative. The restaurateur's promise usually assumed that the restaurateur would continue in his profession, not as a private individual, but as an employee of the cooperative, perhaps even in the position of restaurant manager.⁴⁶ It must be recalled that the cooperative paid the most attention to the station restaurants, while other services were increasingly marginalized. Clearly, it had figured out which services were the most profitable. The cooperative of course presented its activities also in the context of improving the quality of services to passengers.

41 Havl. Brod, Podmokly (Děčín hl. n.), Liberec, Jaroměř, Olomouc hl. n., Zdice, Břeclav, Chomutov, Kolín, Most, Plzeň, Praha Mas. n., Praha hl. n., Karlovy Vary, h. n., Brno, Cheb, Pře-rov, Pardubice. Hradec Králové, Č. Budějovice, Kralupy n. V., Slaný, Česká Lípa, Tábor and Děčín.

42 NA, f. Ministerstvo dopravy I (MD I), b. 189, no. 34975/1948.

43 NA, f. MD I, b. 194, no. 2028/1949.

44 N. N. Služba cestující veřejnosti. In *Svět práce*, 1949, Vol. 5, no. 32, 11. 8. 1949, p. 2.

45 N. N. Družstva zlepšují služby cestujícím. In *Lidové noviny*, 1950, Vol. 58, no. 140, 16. 6. 1950, p. 2.

46 NA, f. MD I, b. 189, no. 18286/1948.

It established a school for its employees in Jevany.⁴⁷ By the beginning of 1949, more than half of the total turnover of station restaurants (400 million Kčs) was achieved in enterprises operated by the cooperative.⁴⁸

A different situation prevailed in Slovakia, given the different circumstances at the end of the war. Railway station buildings, including their restaurants, were in significantly worse condition after the front had passed through. Czechoslovak State Railways (ČSD) was unable to manage the restoration alone, so it worked more closely with leaseholders, who often carried out the repairs themselves. These investments were gradually reimbursed through reductions in rent.

There were 59 station restaurants in Slovakia – 25 in the Košice Railway Directorate district and 34 in the Bratislava district. Of these, only 12 were leased by the Štefánik Fund for Railway Employees, the Slovak equivalent of the Masaryk Fund. The remainder were in private hands, typically individuals recognized for their contributions to the Slovak National Uprising. Slovakia was expected to follow the same path as the Czech lands – eliminating private enterprise and transitioning railway station restaurants to operation by the railway workers' cooperative.⁴⁹

Subsequent development led toward centralization. The cooperative was seen as an interim structure, intended to carry out the task of eliminating private enterprise. Once that task was complete, the goal was to transition to a higher form – namely, a national enterprise. A central administration was established within the Ministry of Internal Trade for state-run hotels, station restaurants, and dining cars, which began taking over these operations. In 1951, regionally focused national enterprises were created under the Ministry of Internal Trade (e.g., *Liberec Station Restaurants, National Enterprise*; *Wallachian-Slovak Station Restaurants, National Enterprise*).

In 1952, a framework agreement was signed between the then Ministry of Railways and the Ministry of Internal Trade. Rent was regulated and standardized – at the beginning of the 1950s, it was set at 144 Kčs per square meter annually for rooms and kiosks.⁵⁰ Eventually, even all the prices of foods and beverages saw centralized regulation, setting these at the same rates at all station restaurants (for example, 10° beer was 10 Kčs).⁵¹

The regional railway station restaurant enterprises were only a temporary organization. From July 1953, all dining was taken over by the Restaurants and Canteens (Restaurace a jídelny /RaJ/) organization and managed by the

47 NA, f. MD I, b. 194, no. 2028/1949.

48 Ibid.

49 NA, f. MD I, b. 194, no. 2028/1949.

50 NA, f. MŽ II, b. 15, no. 10037/53.

51 N. N. Postup odůvodněný. In *Pravda*, 1951, Vol. 7, no. 39, 1. 6. 1951, p. 5.

regional national committees. Their task was to operate catering services within the individual regions. After the administrative reform was carried out in 1960, the management of the RaJ enterprises was transferred to the district national committees.⁵² Only a very small fraction of the station restaurants was transferred under the jurisdiction of the Dining and Sleeping Cars company (e.g. Prague Main Railway Station) which, as the name suggests, provided the operation of dining and sleeping cars on railway lines.⁵³

The decline of railway station restaurants can be generally observed beginning in the early 1950s. In the milieu of broader societal changes, the class-based division of spaces was abolished, and the restaurants took on a more “populist” or working-class character. This shift was reflected in their reclassification into lower price categories, with corresponding adjustments in the menu offerings and quality of service. Development was hampered by low investment in modernization. Complaints about cleanliness, food quality, and staff behavior began appearing more frequently in the press. White tablecloths, which were costly to maintain, gradually disappeared as well. This decline was part of a broader deterioration in the quality of gastronomy that occurred in Czechoslovakia during the 1950s.⁵⁴ The furnishing of most establishments still harked back to the interwar period. The traffic declined and the less busy ones were closed. In the mid-1960s, there was an effort to reverse this trend in view of developing tourism. New negotiations between the ministries of transport and internal trade aimed to increase the level of dining services provided. This was to be reflected in the new framework agreement concluded in 1965. The specific form of operation of the station restaurant was to be resolved by agreements concluded between the station head and the RaJ company.⁵⁵ The agreement, however, brought no fundamental changes and the gradual decline continued.

In the interest of speeding up food service, self-service cafeterias became increasingly common. In this setup, customers would receive their food at a service counter and then carry it to a table themselves. Contemporary opinions on this format were mixed. On the one hand, the speed and staff savings were praised; on the other, criticism arose over how passengers with luggage or small children were expected to carry trays of food by themselves. The RaJ organization primarily pushed for the transformation of traditional restaurants into self-

52 N. N. Čtvrtstoletí úspěšné práce Restaurací a jídelen. In *Stráž lidu*, 1978, y. 58, no. 92, 10. 8. 1978, p. 3.

53 MUSIL, *Vůně pražských nádraží*, p. 30.

54 ŠTEMBERK and JAKUBEC. *Hotel Alcron. K dějinám symbolu českého a československého hotelnictví*. Praha 2022, p. 81-82.

55 ZA Opava, f. Sm KNV Ostrava, b. 31, no. 98.

service units for financial reasons. Attempts by ČSD to convert some of these self-service spots back into full-service restaurants met with firm resistance.⁵⁶

On the other hand, walking food vendor service on train platforms gradually declined. This was partly due to the shortening of train stop durations at stations. By the 1960s, such service remained only at major stations. From the perspective of the RaJ organization, it was a service they increasingly sought to limit. A partial replacement came in the form of fast-food kiosks placed on individual platforms. A novelty during this period was the introduction of vending machines.⁵⁷ However, these often created complications. The placement of kiosks on platforms limited space for passenger movement, and any queues that formed could completely block the platform. Once again, the conflicting interests of RaJ and the railway station administrations became apparent. It became apparent that the station administrations were usually at a disadvantage. Passengers demanded refreshments, and any threats from RaJ to shut down a business usually halted criticism for a time.⁵⁸

When reviewing inspection reports on travel culture from the 1970s onward, we encounter increasingly frequent criticism of hygiene standards and the overall dining culture in railway station restaurants (e.g., at Ostrava Main Station).⁵⁹ During the construction of the new Prague-Holešovice station in the 1980s, a serious debate arose over whether a station restaurant should be included in the new building at all. Critics pointed out that this type of restaurant had become a declining form of dining establishment. Ultimately, the building did include a restaurant called Kompas, though it resembled more of a wine bar than a traditional railway station restaurant.⁶⁰

Conclusion

The development of passenger rail transport brought with it the emergence of station restaurants. During the latter half of the 19th century, these restaurants built up a very good reputation. This was certainly because they were run by the best people in Czech gastronomy of the time. This would never have been possible if the railway had operated the restaurants itself. The chosen lease model, which primarily took into account the professional qualities of the entrepreneur, contributed to building the good reputation of the station restaurant. Maintaining

56 ZA Opava, f. Sm KNV Ostrava, b. 33, no. 112, Prověřka Krajské komise lidové kontroly a statistiky v Ostravě v oblasti kultury cestování – opatření, 30. 6. 1965.

57 ZA Opava, f. Sm KNV Ostrava, b. 31, no. 98.

58 ZA Opava, f. Sm KNV Ostrava, b. 33, no. 112.

59 ZA Opava, f. Sm KNV Ostrava, b. 136, no. 197.

60 MUSIL, *Vůně pražských nádraží*, p. 96.

the high standard of station restaurants was also helped by a certain design unity in their furnishings. This created the impression of a unified network of quality catering facilities. Station restaurants reached their golden era at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The impetus for changes was the advent of dining cars and changes in the concept of timetables reflecting the acceleration of transport. In the interwar period, the popularity of lunch counters offering quick and simple refreshments grew. The post-war period changed the concept of station restaurant operations, initiating its adaptation to socialism. This, however, did not bring an increase in the quality of services, but quite the opposite. Station restaurants were acquiring a working-class character, there was no longer room for luxury. Lack of investment, dilapidation of station buildings, the decline of gastronomy and the formalized relationship between the waiter and the guest all had a negative impact.

About the authors

Prof. PhDr. Ivan Jakubec, CSc.

Faculty of Arts, Institute of History, Charles University

Nám. Jana Palacha 2, CZ-110 00 Prague 1

Czech Republic

e-mail: Ivan.Jakubec@ff.cuni.cz

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9793-9254>

<https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=15028970000>

Doc. JUDr. PhDr. Jan Štemberk

Faculty of Humanities, Charles University

Pátkova 2137/5, CZ-182 00 Prague 8

Czech Republic

e-mail: jan.stemberk@fhs.cuni.cz

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8433-5769>

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