

CZECH AIR ARCHIVES

By JERRY SLONIGER

Prague, the "golden city" of Bohemian tales, lies closer to Central Europe than does Paris. And Prague shelters one of the most varied, almost incongruous, aviation archives I know, a real gold mine which surfaced briefly in 1968 and again moved out of reach.

The fine old game of airplane looking and poking splits into two halves in Prague; a sprawling technical museum with often improperly identified catch-all exhibits and three rooms of hand-bound files tucked into a military building on the other side of town.

Incidentally, the museum exhibits — the only things even partially open to photographers — are occasionally mis-tagged on purpose. Many of the models in particular were built and installed through the 1950's when only fine, up-standing East European designs were deemed good enough. Our archivist could get U.S. airplanes, for example, into the collection by telling the bosses that these foreigners were solid socialists. Many still suffer under this confusion.

Of course, the Czechs couldn't pick up just any item

needed to fill a gap. Their collection skips blithely from a Bleriot, belonging to the first Czech pilot, to Russian jets and local sport planes. The aviation archive is equally empirical, the work of one man whose official responsibility was for their railroad collection. He couldn't bear to see "western" aviation materials thrown away in the late 1940's and thus a 1600-odd volume file was born.

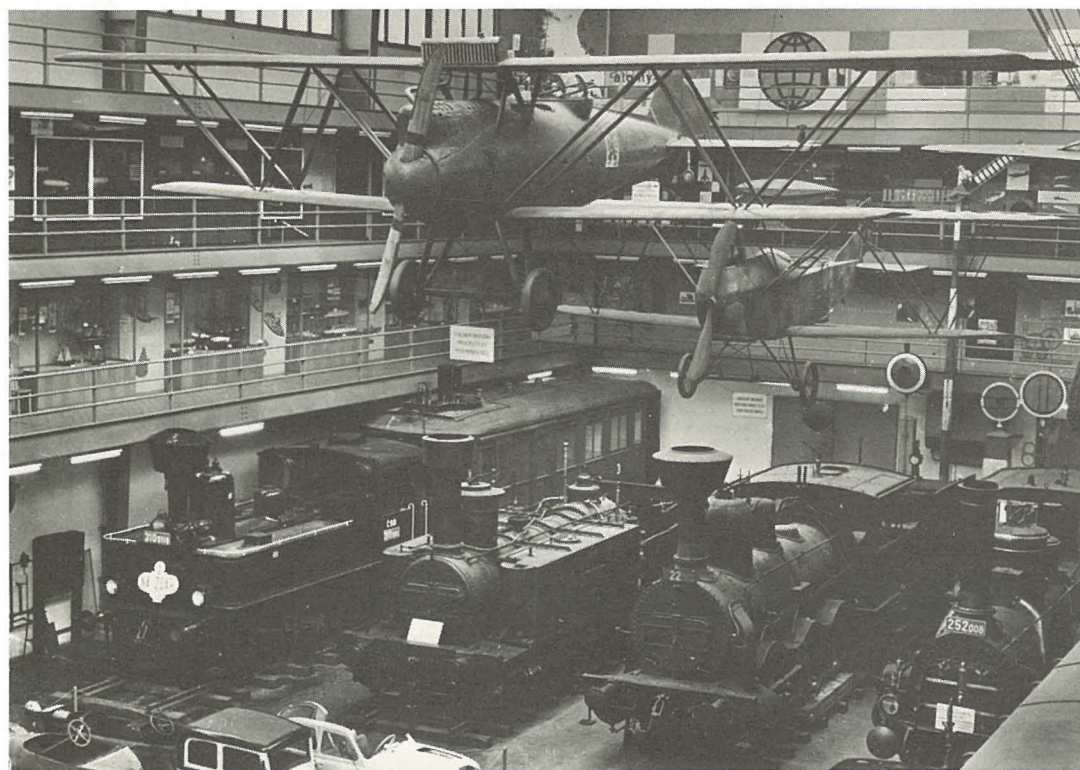
The real base for this Czech assembly was formed by Luftwaffe file cards, apparently kept on every airplane the methodical Germans ever heard of. I found full technical data, for instance, on the Lincoln Standard Sport, right down to rate of climb and wing loading, all entered meticulously on a printed basic card.

Immediately prior to V-E day the Germans moved this collection out of Berlin to escape the Russian onslaught and got much of it as far as Prague before simply dropping the lot in a field. Nobody knows what proportion survived — the archivist suspects he managed to save anything from 50% to 80%.



Editor's note: Author Sloniger submitted these three photographs which further illustrate and verify the listings of aircraft for Prague's National Technical Museum by Stephen Muth in his *MUSEUM & DIS-SUMMER* — 1969

PLAY AIRCRAFT OF THE WORLD. (See *JOURNAL*, Spring 1969, P.62) Above, the Knoller, Hansa Brandenburg, Bleriot XI (belonged to the first Czech pilot), and the Phonix, in the Hall of Transport.



Another view of the Hall of Transport, National Technical Museum, Prague.

Below, the U.S.-built L.W.F. V of 1918 design, C/n 4, hangs above the WWII era Messerschmidt Me-262-1A, and two more recent acquisitions, the Lavochkin La-7 and the Mikoyan MIG-15. OK-AHN is a MIC Sokol, Production No. 118. How the L.W.F. found its way into the Prague Museum would be interesting to learn.

Starting with these cards he arranged every scrap left over in their technical museum, brochures begged from the U.S. representative when one was still there, and his own hand-colored drawings of such airplanes as caught his fancy. Each airplane, man or engine note was mounted on good paper and the whole bound into volumes now totalling well over 1600.

An airplane that might be considered common receives one page attention because he had no more data; others receive half a book including factory manuals, publicity photos, newspaper clips and — of course — the ex-German file card.

With only an afternoon to snoop as much as I liked my notes are thin: the first room of his file system is given largely to Czech planes and pilots, a rich source for some Specialist in Czechoslovakian air history. There is a wall or more of LTA material and a wide range of the French and English aircraft data.

The U.S. section begins with volumes 1496 and 1497 being devoted to personalities. Various and random airplanes from America are listed alphabetically in the next 20 tomes, followed by a hundred books on specific factories with their models arranged under parent company. These include Allison to Wright but you occasionally have to think twice to find one.

The Whirlwind might pop up under either Curtiss or Wright or both, depending on lettering size or prominence on the brochure in question. The gentleman in charge speaks very little English and only most careful German.

The Invalidovna collection in Prague-Karlin is a true lost Dutchman Mine of information. Yet friends over there promise me that their present "guests" won't stay forever—so we can always dream.

