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National houses in Moravia and in Central Europe.

This project is focused on the specific segment of Central European architecture of the second half of 19th and the first decade of 20th century – particularly on so called national houses. The term seems to be fairly broad but it can be quite precisely defined in the context of the period by the title itself, by the function and sometimes by its architectural style or national decorations. As for the title, there is a large group of buildings that were termed “national house” or more specifically: “Deutsches house” (German house), “Český dům” (Czech house), “Dom Polski” (Polish house), and so on. As for the function, the national houses were multifunctional buildings determined to be centres of social life for gatherings of a community of people who considered themselves as a part of the same nation. As for the style, besides universal Italianising Neo-Renaissance (and later Art Nouveau), some local styles were used. Moreover, exterior as well as interior decorations had symbolical meanings.

One of the crucial points determining national houses as a specific type of building is that they were built and owned by private associations or clubs. This is due to mass popularity of cultural, sport and educational associations in the second half of 19th century. They were emerging in every city, town and village – in the course of time divided according to nationality. These associations often joined together and built a national house for their purposes and also to strengthen national movement.

Second specific feature of a national house is large accumulation of diverse functions. These buildings served mainly as club offices of different associations but sometimes also as libraries and reading rooms, school classes, as branches of savings banks and offices of local newspapers. Part of the building and also its garden were used as a restaurant, sometimes some rooms served as a hotel, sometimes as a gym. But the most important element of all national houses was a large representative hall used for banquets, concerts, plays, discussions and similar purposes.

And finally - a national house was a representation of a specific nation. So, we may speak about “nationality of a building”, determined by distinctive architectural style or by decoration based on national symbols or even myths (of course not always in large scale). These three points together (alongside with frequent literal designation) define the type of a national house and at least at one point make it different from other types of buildings, such as theatres, clubhouses, meeting houses, gyms, saving banks, etc. Hence, as emerged from above mentioned a national house is self-contained and specific construction type that appeared in the Central Europe in the second half of the 19th century and cannot be mixed with others.

Therefore, it is not surprising that most of the national houses are from the territory of former Austro-Hungarian Empire, ergo from the area where many nations lived together for centuries. But in the 19th century the national revivals worsened their relationships and led to delimitation of each nation. It seems that most of the national houses were built by those who felt oppressed. In provinces of multi-culture, multiethnic and multilingual Empire (in Bohemia, Moravia, Galicia, Bukovina, Carniola, or Upper Hungary) it was the Slavic population who felt subordinated and needed some place as a base for their cultural and national activities which were sometimes banned by German or Hungarian authorities. On the other hand the Germans often built their national houses as a symbol of their power, wealth and development (of course this is simplified a little because each case must be considered individually).

This leads to an explanation why Moravia is emphasized in the title of this paper. It's not only because it is a homeland of the author of this paper but also it is because after some time spent by research it emerged that it was just Austro-Hungarian provinces of Bohemia, Moravia and Austrian Silesia where the frictions between Czechs and Germans, concerning administration, education, cultural events, elections, language equality etc., were so strong that it led to mutual delimitation and even to hatred. These circumstances caused that till now around eighty national houses have been identified in the territory of Moravia and Austrian Silesia (one fourth of them are German, less than ten Polish, others are Czech). It was decided to explore and describe in detail national houses in Moravia, as an example, and to make a shorter digression to other provinces, e.g. to Bohemia, Galicia and today Slovakia and Slovenia.

National houses, freed of emotions, are nowadays a topic, which can reveal important segment of our knowledge about the past times and architecture of historicism and art nouveau.