

V O L U N T A R Y F I R E B R I G A D E S

In many places all over Moravia, local clubs and associations became the backbone of social life in Sulkovec a Polom.

In the country, the clubs and associations not only aided people with practical matters, but also helped with recreation and entertainment. Polom and Sulkovec were no exceptions; lists of once active clubs and associations still exist.

In late 1910s, several associations were active in Sulkovec, which was quite a lot for such a small village in the Czech-Moravian Highlands. The most important of them was the Voluntary Fire Brigade. These brigades in addition to extinguishing fires were also of significance on the cultural scene.

The village had an amateur theatre club and a local chapter of an organization called “Country youth club from Moravia and Silesia” (Venkovská omladina). Another association, “Cattle Insurance” existed in order to support farming activities. Nearby Polom had only one, but very active association – the Voluntary Fire Brigade.

Whereas not much is known about the existence of other associations, the local chronicles from both Sulkovec and Polom make reference to multilateral and other meritorious activities.

Experiences with devastating fires, a few that had even come close to the farms and structures of both villages, Sulkovec and Polom, forced the locals to establish voluntary fire brigades. Although the organization may have been designed to protect the villages from any form of dangerous or destructive elements, the primary impetus was nonetheless the real fear of fires.

A fire broke out on the 15th of May 1887 in Josef Jílek’s house. In no time the structure was engulfed in flames. Only when the fire had destroyed pretty well everything, did the fire brigade from Nedvězí arrive.

Watching the flames, the residents of Sulkovec are said to have remarked that a well organized group of “climbers”, as fire-fighters were called in those days, would have been helpful.

As a result of this conflagration, *Sulkovec local board tabled a motion resolving to purchase a communal fire engine; it was adopted by a unanimous vote.* Meanwhile, the mayor of the village J. Dvořák and teacher J Kovářík came up with the *idea of establishing a voluntary fire brigade in Sulkovec; the citizenry agreed on it enthusiastically. An organizational meeting was called and was well attended.*

Less than a month later, on the 12th of June 1887, a fire brigade was established in Sulkovec. Organization structure as worked out by Josef Kovářík and Jan Dvořák. The former became the commander; the latter the deputy of the Brigade. The Fire Brigade was divided into three platoons. Foremen were Karel Ondra, Michal Jandl and Antonín Jelínek; their deputies were František Cibulka, Alois Ehrenberg and František Mareček.

The firemen from Sulkovec had an opportunity to prove their abilities and their determination to fulfill their fire fighting charter, on the 25th September of the same year.

A local hemp-kiln caught fire. The volunteer firemen described this fire along with their successful efforts in putting it out, in a carefully kept and literally valuable chronicle: *It caught fire with such intensity that all wooden parts and the roof went down in flames. Strong wind meant risk of a much worse disaster, but local fire brigade, summoned in haste, extinguished it in a short moment.*

The local firemen took their task very seriously. A number of yearly held special exercises were organized – alarm sounding, fire fighting, marching with hook ladder and marching with the fire engine.

In the year the fire brigade was established, a night watch was also introduced. That year, these summertime watches started on the 15th of August and lasted until the 15th of November, or the time the threat of fire was at its highest.

In compliance with the fire charter, one fireman together with local bellman were on guard each every night. The commander, his deputy and foremen, who were responsible for supervising the night guards, were excused from night shifts. This watch was repeated the following year.

From the very beginning, the firemen sought to have the most effective fire fighting equipment and were fastidious in its upkeep. In this, they were fully supported by local municipal authorities. Inspiration also came from their colleagues from nearby villages.

On the 26th of June 1887, the firemen went on a trip to Trhonice where the local fire brigade put on a demonstration of a two-wheeled fire engine. As the fire engine proved effective, they decided to purchase one for their village too. Several weeks later, they purchased their own two-wheeled fire engine with 80 meters (87.5 yards) of fire hose from the firm F. Smekola from Prague.

Later the same year, the gradual improvements in their fire fighting equipment continued in that parts of uniforms were bought; indeed, they were the first to possess helmets. Soon thereafter, the firemen had canvas uniforms sewn, and distributed among all active members. The outfitting of the fire brigade improved and modernized year by year.

The improvements can be seen in an audit that was made at the occasion of 25th anniversary of the brigade. Inasmuch as the firemen in Sulkovec started with nothing, by 1913 they had their own four-wheeled fire engine, 240 meters (262.5 yards) of fire hose, another two fire engines, six water buckets, thirteen ladders, and all equipment working order. The brigade possessed dress uniforms for 32 men, signal tubes, lanterns and other various items. The library contained 37 specialized publications and bound journals.

The firemen never considered their membership in the brigade as more than honorable service to their community. They considered their service as an occasion to demonstrate their ties to the local community. Nonetheless, showing themselves off in their dress uniforms in front of their fellow countrymen must have brought pride and personal satisfaction. The firemen entertained well too, and enjoyed being with their friends, the rustic countrymen and fellow citizens of their village.

That the firemen from Sulkovec partook in village festivals and marched proudly in their dress uniforms is documented by their presence on the 31st of March 1888, when during the ceremony of Resurrection of our Lord, "*they behaved exemplarily and carried themselves well*".

Firemen from Sulkovec often combined their exercises with entertainment; together they often drank beer on Sunday afternoons. They also participated in exercises and drinking sessions in neighboring villages, where they were warmly received.

Since 1889 the firemen in Sulkovec organized their own balls. The first one took place in Šimek's pub and was successful. Neighbors as well as non-residents were invited year after year. The ball was usually held in January or February and continued to be even throughout the war years.

Members of the volunteer Fire Brigade in Sulkovec had cordial relationships. They often met after a flawless exercise or after a successful firefight to drink and celebrate their achievements. At a customary celebration in 1890, initiated by their deputy, the teacher Josef Kovářík, the chronicler of the brigade, these emotional words were written: *February the 5th will always be a memorable day, especially for the deputy of the brigade. He was expressed to much trust, more than he had ever expected. When he was bringing his young wife back home after their wedding, they were warmly greeted with music, and with the whole brigade present he was awarded an honorary diploma from the commander. I do hope these lines express the highest appreciation and my gratitude to our brigade and especially to our commander, whose friendship is highly cherished. I only wish that I could repay him for all that he had given me.*

Their mutual solidarity was evidenced when in their first year the members of the brigade decided unanimously to incorporate a paragraph into their service charter that stated that all of them would go in their dress uniforms to a funeral of an active or contributing member, whether he was a Catholic or Evangelic. This took place for the first time on the 19th of November 1887, when they paid the last respects to their contributing member Josef Šimek.

When taking stock of their activities in 1912, at their 12th anniversary, the numbers spoke for themselves. In the course of twenty five years, the brigade participated in putting out fires 39 times: once in Korovice, Hluboké, Hartmanice, Jimramov and Chlum, twice in Nyklovice, three times in Veselí, Nedvězí and Sulkovec, four times in Bystré, five times in Polom and Ubušín and nine times in Ubušín.

Altogether, the brigade carried out 221 exercises, or on average nine in a given year. 39 of them were signal exercises, 18 marching exercises, 28 mixed, meaning signal and marching, 102 exercises with engines, 27 alarms and 7 public exercises connected with a travel.

The firemen from Sulkovec were respectable citizens.

The respectability of the brigade can be indirectly gauged through the responses to requests for donations relating to upgrading of their fire fighting equipment. They not only approached institutions – e.g. tax offices, but even his Majesty František Josef himself.

For example, on the 28th of January 1888, the savings bank in Kunštát accorded their request and granted them 20 guilders. The granting of a subsidy was referred to as “golden news”. The very first news of this kind arrived to Sulkovec on the 8th of April 1888, when His Majesty donated 50 guilders. Commemorating the gift a local citizens wrote into the fire brigade as follows: *Love and loyalty to our monarch has grown and it will encourage our brigade in hard work and solidarity. God save him!*

Another “golden news” arrived soon thereafter, on the 19th of April of the same year. Then, the Brigade received an even 100 guilders from the Provincial Board. The local chronicler took note: *I am very pleased to record these two big donations. The year 1988 is a blessed one for our brigade.*

The Fire Brigade in Sulkovec survived the Austrian Hungarian Monarchy and worked on well in the mid-war period and even after the war. Despite such a long tradition, local people do not carry on, which is a pity; not only from the point of view of protection from dangerous element, which fires still remain, but there is another important point – firemen used to be the best and most proficient organizers of all sorts of entertainment.

The Fire Brigade in Sulkovec survived the Austrian Hungarian Monarchy and continued to exist through the war years and beyond. In spite of the long tradition, the fire brigade no longer exists. This is unfortunate not only from the point of view of protection from dangerous elements, of which risk of fire remains, but also from the fact that the firemen were such wonderful organizers of all sorts of entertainment.

Today, young people in Sulkovec still gather, be it now informally and despite being materially well off, to date there have been no moves to restore local volunteer fire brigade. This is disconcerting to the local elders, especially since the neighboring fire brigade in Polom is going strong.

As a rule, even the most active and successful associations have their ups and downs. The fire brigade in Sulkovec was no exception.

An entry in the fire brigade chronicle in 1898, states that the Brigade in Sulkovec started “to come apart precariously”, but that thanks to Alois Janda, who “worked his way up from the bottom” to become the commander, they reunited and consolidated team.

Perhaps the would-be volunteer fire fighters are awaiting that someone who would take charge and restore the brigade.

The Volunteer Fire Brigade in Polom was established in 1894 and the mayor of the village Štěpán Ondráček, farmers Josef Jíra, František Jíra, Čeněk Ambrož and local teacher Jan Kalina were there to witness it.

The firemen from Polom fought fire the following year, in November 1895, when Ondráček’s drying kiln caught fire. Since then, local fire fighters have never missed a fire.

They fought fires not only in Polom, but also in nearby villages, just as their colleagues from Sulkovec did. Likewise, as the brigade from Sulkovec, the Polom team was aware of their standing in their community, and they knew of course, how to entertain themselves.

Not only after the establishing of the, but even at, they were able to meet patriotic feelings, possibly by their own participation on the organizing of national celebrations.

From the end of the 19th century though the founding of the first Czechoslovak Republic the firemen remained as a cohesive whole, which in part may have enhance their patriotic feelings and provided them with the energy to organize national celebrations.

From the very beginning, all important activities of the fire brigade had been scrupulously documented in a single volume chronicle.