

Former Czechoslovakia  
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Historically, the Czech experience with Islam was mainly influenced by the 'Turkish Menace' (the 150-year Ottoman presence in Hungary, including land which later became southern Slovakia, and the two Ottoman sieges of Vienna in 1529 and 1683). Due to its geographical location and the nature of its historical development, however, the territory of historical Czech Lands (Bohemia and Moravia) never actually had direct contact with Islamic civilization.



**Brikcius a few days before his death in 1959**

There were, of course, marginal contacts on the medieval commercial routes running through the Lands, the negligible participation of the Premyslid Dynasty in the Crusades to the Holy Land, and individual journeys of discovery made by Czech burghers and nobles to the Islamic East. The cultural influence of Islam was also tepid, evidenced only in the orientalist trend of the contemporary nobles (Turkish and other Islamic motifs in fashion and architecture, e.g. the Romantic minaret from the turn of the 18th century at the Liechtenstein estate in Lednice, Southern Moravia) and in certain elements of the urban lifestyle ('Turkish' coffee houses in Prague, etc.). The modern Czech experience with Islam has been, however, somewhat more varied, yet always mediated and shaped within the context of the political rivalry between the Habsburg monarchy and the Ottoman Empire.

The situation changed markedly only after the Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878 and full annexation in 1908. Thereafter, Bohemia and Moravia were components of a state body which incorporated a significant Islamic community. At first, the Bosnian (as well as Croat) Muslims resisted Austrian intervention, but during the period leading up to World War I, the Muslim national organizations used professed loyalty to the Habsburg authority to fend off the radical nationalism of the Serbs and Croats. Of course, the Austrian annexation brought no important economic benefits to the Bosnian population; some Muslims even took advantage of the mobility within the new borders to seek work elsewhere. From 1878 to 28 October 1918 (foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic), there was a continuous latent migration of 'Bosnians' to the northern regions of the monarchy. Most were minor craftsmen, confectioners, ice cream manufacturers, grocers, and university students in Prague and Brno.

# Beginnings of the Muslim Religious Community in Former Czechoslovakia

By 15 July 1912, the demographic changes had eventually led to Emperor Franz Josef I's signing of Act no. 159/1912 of the Imperial Code in Bad Ischl, by which the State henceforth recognized the 'Hanafite Islamic religious rite'. On the basis of this Act, the Hanafite *madhad* was 'to be understood within the Crown Lands and those Lands represented in the Imperial Council as a religious community in the sense of the basic constitutional law of 21-12-1867', i.e. the December Constitution, which legally anchored the new constitutional framework as part of Austro-Hungarian settlement. The Act demanded that legal and ritual norms be upheld so as to comply with the established legal customs in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Act permitted the participation of *ulama'* from Bosnia in setting up and running the communities within the Empire. However, their work had to be monitored and if it was felt to contravene the 'public interest', it could be forcibly disbanded. In terms of later development, the key section of the Act was para. 7, which stated that 'concerning the marriages of adherents of Islam and the maintenance of birth, marriage and death records' one's own (secular) regulations had to be applied.

The year 1918 marked the disintegration of the Habsburg monarchy, but the previous demographic movements did not abate with the creation of the new borders. Many of the Balkan Muslims who had settled in the territory, which had become the Czechoslovak Republic, decided to remain and others were attracted by the better economic situation as well as by previous business and family relationships. These were soon joined by the numerous Islamic emigrants from the Soviet Union (especially the Cherkess and the Tartars). Only in the mid-1930s did the Muslims, mostly residing in Prague and Brno, begin to form a religious association. Before then, only individuals gathered spontaneously to practise Islamic rituals – usually with members of the same nationality.

The first considerations about the establishment of an Islamic community were concretized by the end of 1934. The mixed group of both foreign and Czech individuals assembled a group of practising Prague Muslims to found the 'Muslim Religious Community for Czechoslovakia with a Centre in Prague'. The participants agreed to ascertain the number of Prague Muslims and to evaluate their willingness to take part in building up a community, to obtain as much information as possible about one another, to organize educative and cautious missionary activities and to construct a mosque in Prague. The Community was then solemnly founded on April 25, 1935 as an assembly, which included 'numerous sympathizers' from

the Prague intelligentsia, business circles interested in trading with Islamic countries and the diplomatic missions of Islamic states.

Four basic components contributed to the birth of the Community: a) foreign Muslims living in CSR; b) foreign Islamic institutions; c) representative bodies of some Islamic states; and d) Czech converts. Available archive materials reveal that the Community was the focus of a mostly stable set of foreign practising Muslims, who saw in their participation in the Community, an opportunity to reinforce their own spiritual identity amidst a 'foreign' civilization, to organize Islamic rituals in collectivity and to broaden societal life in the spirit of their own traditions. The idea of vehemently spreading the Islamic mission never seemed to be in the forefront – perhaps only because of the foreigners' caution in their relations to the Czech state authorities, which did not seem to express a particular understanding for the Community's purposes. On the government's side, the Ministry of Culture and Education, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Justice alike, repeatedly postponed and administratively complicated the Community's demands for recognition and some facilities throughout the entire period of the '30s. Even the authorities of *Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren* after 15 March 1939 did not take much notice of the group of foolish 'exhibitionists', excepting the occasional suspicion of citizens of foreign origin.

Besides the 'foreign' Muslims, in terms of modern Czech history (and even current thinking on 'Euro-Islam'), the rather small group of Czechoslovak citizens who had converted to Islam, is worthy of special mention. It was they who made the greatest efforts in spreading the faith in the CSR. The most influential figure among them was Alois Bohdan Brikcius, who assumed the name Mohammed Abdullah after conversion. In addition, his name in his books and in certain official documents is often preceded by the honorary title *Hadji*, which Brikcius had the right to bear as a member of the 1933 pilgrimage to Mecca. This was shortly after accepting the Islamic faith in the French colony of Djibouti with his second wife Marie through the decree of a local *qadi*.

Brikcius was certainly a complex personality to whom the author of this article cannot do justice without a certain subjective impression, even after so many years and with an almost complete documentary background available. The only sources missing are those concerning his alleged imprisonment, having been sentenced to eight years on the basis of president Edvard Beneš' 'little decree', punishing pro-Nazi collaborators.

Brikcius' positive, strongly romantic and emotional relationship with the Arabs and Islamic civilization had been shaped in his youth in the '20s. This rapport was developed during his journeys to the Middle East and had ripened in a context of the international political situation, especially in terms of the British and French rule over much of the Islamic world. Brikcius had some bad experiences with the British authorities. As a European Muslim he was treated with suspicion in India as well as East Africa, and, together with his Muslim friends, he perceived the arrogance of the colonial authorities as a humiliating conspiracy. In this spirit he was also willing to understand the sympathy of the Turks and many Arab nationalists to the Third Reich. This simplified vision prevented him from seeing the danger posed by Nazism to his own country (although unambiguous signs of a tense right-wing nationalism can be found in his pre-Protectorate texts), as well as that posed by Nazi racial theory to his beloved Arabs. His beliefs reached their climax in the years of war, when in *Hlas* (Voice), the mouthpiece of the Community, he had published a couple of purely anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi articles.

Brikcius' image of Islam as a remarkable civilization rather than a religious system can especially be seen in his books and articles. He worked mostly as a journalist in the *Prague Mid-day Paper* and in the *Vlajka* (The Banner) journal of the Czech Fascists. Only there and in the Community's *Hlas* did he have the opportunity to formulate his sharpest critiques of Britain, 'Jewish Bolshevism' and Zionism and never stopped informing those persuaded Arabs and other Muslims that Germany would rid them of Western colonialism, Marxism and the 'Zionist conspiracy'. However, nowhere in the archive material does Brikcius express sympathy for Nazi ideology as such. Unlike him, most other Czech Muslims of a younger generation lived in a kind of schizophrenia concerning prevailing pro-Nazi feelings in many Islamic countries. In the post-war political milieu, they changed their views immediately.

In their ideas, Brikcius and his adherents were unable to define a clear boundary between Islam as a religious system (or at least a civilization based thereupon) and the actual political situation. When Hadji professed his admiration of Islam, he often referred to its humiliation – most frequently in the form of the betrayal and exploitation of Arabs by the English in 1916 and 1917 in following their own colonial interests. He was a romantic, a person who sincerely and spontaneously adored the Islamic world of deserts, oases and urban oriental architecture, just as he did the openness and hospitality of the local populations. On the other hand, as a leader of a Muslim community, he did not always have very precise ideas about Islamic countries and customs, the peripeteia of Islamic legislation and the plurality of modern currents of Islamic thought.

The Czech Muslim community was at least recognized in December 1941, in the darkest days of Czechoslovak history. No wonder that after May 1945, when the presidential 'decrees' were implemented, all the laws and decrees from the years of occupation were eliminated. Thus, neither the 'First Republic' nor the post-war democratic regime was ready to accept an 'innocent' Muslim group in the midst of the Czech society. It is quite natural that after the Communist takeover (February 1948) the Muslim community practically ceased to exist. The life of Muslims under the Communist rule and after the political events of the year 1989 is a story of quite another chapter of the Czech contemporary history. ♦