

Ján Kollár: First Poet on a Dandy Horse?

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The marvellous invention – *die laufmaschine*, or dandy horse, understandably made its way into the Czech lands after its initial development in Mannheim, Germany. Ján Kollár (1793–1852), a poet writing in Czech, who was originally from Slovakia, wrote about the dandy horse. His best known verses that reference the dandy horse, are the four lines from his poem *Daughter of Slava*. These verses contain, amongst other things:

*To speed up my trot
And to save my time
A machine I bought
Made by Drais in
Mannheim (this year)*

Kollár expanded this poem, his key work, throughout his lifetime. It was first published in 1824, when it had 2,222 verses. In its 1832 publication it already had 9,130 verses, but the author felt that he still had more to say. These verses that interest us did not appear until the 1852 edition, shortly after Kollár's death (he died on 24 January 1852). Did he recall and write about *die laufmaschine* some thirty years after first seeing it?

He studied in Jena, Germany from October 1817 to March of 1819. In Germany during this time, the machine must have greatly affected every young man and the public in general. It was truly revolutionary at the time. But why did he write about the dandy horse so late? And this was especially true because he is said to have ridden one to see his beloved Mína.

Kollár did not mention the dandy horse in any of his other work (and he was a very prolific author). Perhaps an explanation can be found in his description of his travels in Italy in 1841. While Czech literary scientists tend to notice the fact that Kollár erroneously thought that Italians were originally of Slavic origin, we are concerned with

this entry in his travel journal: *On the route between Salzburg and (Bad) Ischl, (Austria) we met a wayfaring artisan journeyman, who was carrying all his property, package, shoes, etc. on a small, outfitted, iron, two-wheel vehicle, so lightly and rapidly, that this means of travel would merit copying at home.* The description is too brief and imprecise; it is not clear how the artisan carried his load or what the “two-wheeler” looked like. If this had been an ordinary two-track goods cart or a cart with a shaft, it wouldn't have seemed worth mentioning by Kollár. And the journeyman wouldn't have moved so lightly or so fast. It seems more likely that Kollár in fact saw a dandy horse. In the 1840's, it was rather passé, but if it was still used from

time to time, it most certainly would have attracted attention, as is indicated by Kollár.

But why was it called a “two-wheeler”, not a draisien? Is it possible that he would have forgotten that he had ridden in Jena in 1818 when he visited his love? If he saw a “two-wheeler” in 1841, when he didn't recall a dandy horse, we can conclude that Kollár not only hadn't sat on (and certainly hadn't bought) a dandy horse by that time, but probably hadn't even seen one. He put it to verse much later. It seems to me that some more informed person told him the “two-wheeler” was a draisien. It wasn't until then that he discovered what that two-wheeler actually was.

Considering the generally accepted history, it is a sufficiently serious thought for us not to take Ján Kollár as the first Czech cyclist. Doubts are created by several more conclusive arguments, supported by clues provided by Kollár himself. When he was recalling the time of his studies in Jena, he wrote, amongst other things: “I must deserve every cent for my university study, pain-

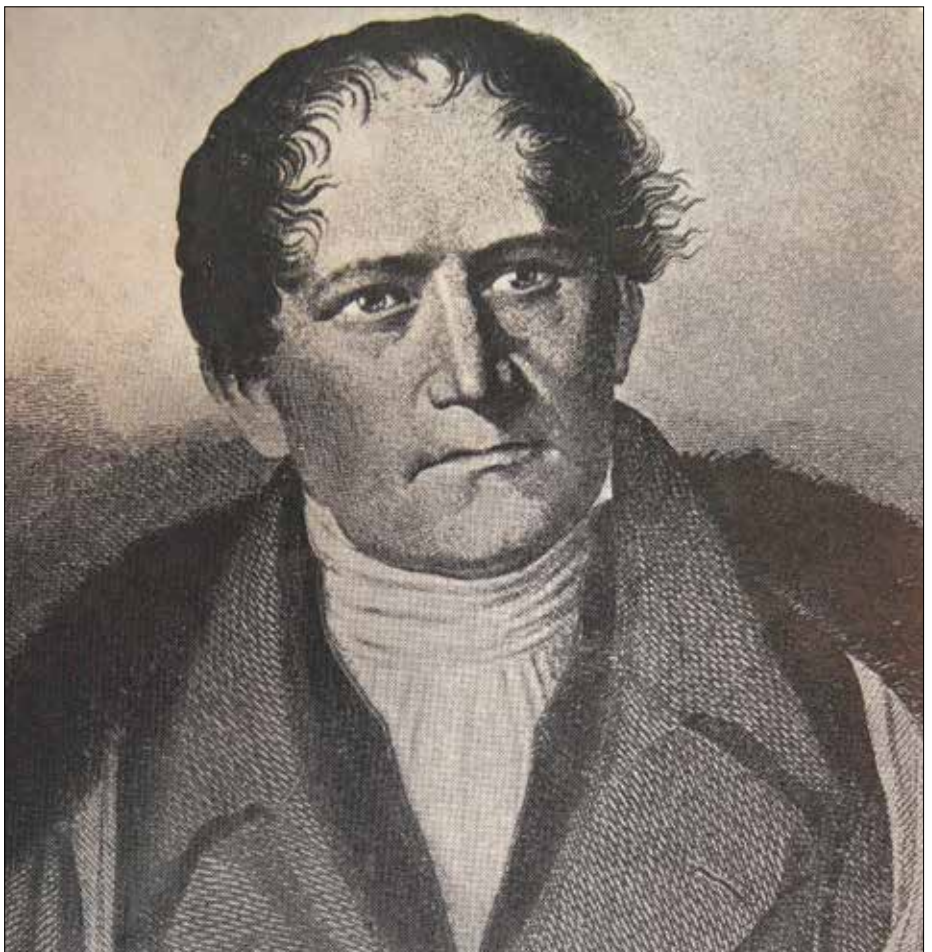


Figure 1. Ján Kollár. July 25, 1793 Mošovce, Slovakia – January 24, 1852 Vienna, Austria

fully and with calluses". And he then continues, "I had resolved to stay at the German academy for at least two years, but my money ran out and Jena was an expensive place to live at that time... The scholarships, from Bystrice and Bratislava (that he received – author's note), were very small, because they had to be divided amongst thirty Hungarians who were studying at Jena at that time. And so it happened that I couldn't stay in Jena or even outfit myself for the trip home. I lived full of worries and anxiety and had to think of other means and sources that were opened to me by a kindly Providence." Also, Kollár tutored two sons of court councillor Lüder in Latin in order to make ends meet.

He met Friderika Wilhelmina "Mína", the daughter of the Evangelical pastor Georg Fridrich Schmidt, in March of 1818 and accidentally encountered her again in May of the same year. This was sufficient for Kollár to fall in love with her and want her for his wife. However, Father Schmidt suddenly died and his widow didn't want to allow her daughter to move to Slovakia, which she thought of as a wilderness, and she also wanted to keep her daughter close by to help her. She told Kollár to gain the position of Professor in Jena, or obtain some other position, otherwise she would not give her blessing to the marriage. This is the explanation of the suitor. However, another version states that Mína did not want to move to Hungary and that she did not even return Kollár's love. Purportedly she was infatuated with a student of medicine at that time. In any case, Kollár stated that he wrote to Mína, but their correspondence completely stopped after some time. There is no mention at all of walking, and certainly not travelling, to see her. In addition, in the autumn of 1818, Mrs. Schmidt and her entire family, together with Mína, moved from Lobeda to Jena, where Kollár lived. So where was the need to shorten the way?

Ján Kollár left Jena in March of 1819. As a Slavophile he wanted to travel to Poland and Russia. He noted, however, the "plan of my Poland-Russian trip floundered on the problem of my purse". To be clear, he didn't even have enough money to study in Jena for two years, as he had planned. He had to shorten his stay by half a year. He didn't even have enough to travel where his heart pulled

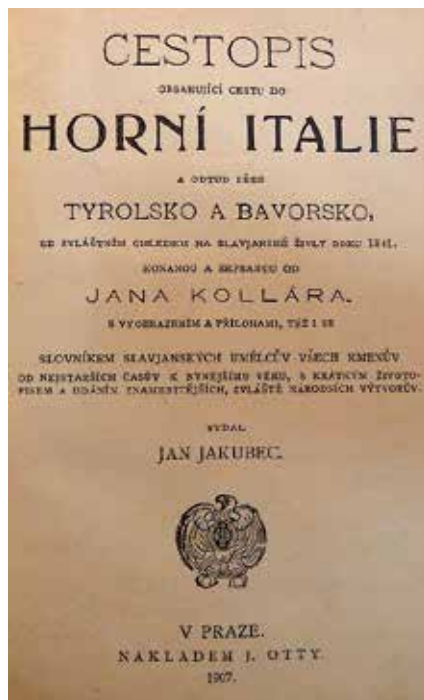


Figure 2. Ján Kollár ravel Journal that contains a description of his trip to Upper Italy.

him. It is ridiculous to imagine that he could have bought a dandy horse, a machine that then had the value of two cows. And even if his funds had been sufficient, he wouldn't have bought one, because he hadn't even heard of one at that time, let alone seen one. Almost a quarter of a century later, he saw a "two-wheeler". This is why the dandy horse appeared in his poem "Daughter of Slava" only in the last version, which was published after his death. There is at least one good bit of news. In 1835, Kollár again accidentally encountered Mína and they were married in the Weimar Cathedral on 22 September 1835.

However, Ján Kollár did play a very minor role in Drais's story. In Jena, Kollár became acquainted with Alexander von Kotzebue, the German dramatist and writer, who was active for years in Russia. Von Kotzebue lectured at Jena and also received high wages from the Russian Czar, to whom he sent reports about German literature and politics. Two of Professor Kotzebue's colleagues found an unfinished letter in his desk. Like "good" colleagues, they copied and published the letter. The text led to tremendous indignation amongst the German students and this culminated on 23 March 1819 in the murder of Kotzebue.

How is this connected with Kollár? He was personally acquainted not

only with Kotzebue, but also with his murderer – the student Karl Ludwig Sand. Kollár met him in Jena several times and, after the tragic event, recalled and described him as a quiet and pensive young man. Sand was sentenced to death. The Supreme Baden Court refused to grant him a pardon. We know that the judge was the father of Karl Drais. Sand was beheaded on 20 May 1820. The students of the Burschenschaft, of which Sand was a member, began to persecute the judge's son Karl Drais as a form of revenge and he was forced to emigrate to Brazil in 1822. There he participated in an expedition led by the natural scientist Georg von Langsdorff. Drais returned to Germany in 1827, but his further fate was already sealed. He died in poverty in his home town of Karlsruhe in 1851, poor and forgotten. Practically no one remembered his *laufmaschine* at that time, paradoxically, with the exception of Ján Kollár.

And now the conclusion: Was Ján Kollár the first poet (writing in Czech) to praise the dandy horse? Yes, but at least thirty years after it was invented.

Was Ján Kollár the first Czech cyclist on a dandy horse? No, he did not ride the Dandy Horse either at the time of its invention or, with great probability, at any time. ●

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