

At the 300th Anniversary of the Birth of Maria Theresa

This year we justifiably reflect upon the historical memory of the enlightened sovereign Maria Theresa (1777-1780). Through the four decades of her rule (1740-1780) Idrija experienced visible progress in all areas of public life: it obtained town privileges, population increased to 3,000 and it was considered the second largest town in the then territory of Carniola for one and a half century (until 1918).

The Idrija mercury mine contributed greatly to the income of the imperial treasury of the empress Maria Theresa, which is why Idrija was granted the status of higher mining office by the “empress” in 1747. The Viennese imperial court wisely assigned capable mining administrators and experienced professionals who deepened the shafts and tunnels, modernised metallurgical units, assembled new “Spanish” furnaces, skilfully made vaulted ceilings in the oldest part of the mine (Anthony’s Shaft) and developed the wooden “Rake”, a 3.5-metre-long energy canal. The mighty river barriers built around 1770 on the Idrijca, Belca and Zala ensured that the mine and town were supplied with floated wood for the next 150 years. At the same time a monumental wheat storehouse (Magazin) was built in the centre of the town and beside it the Theresian theatre, which is now considered the oldest preserved theatre building in Slovenia.

In accordance with the enlightened standpoint of Maria Theresa, her advisors and mining administration Idrija became the cradle of professional education. The polytechnician and constructor of water barriers (Klavže) Jožef Mrak headed the land and mine surveying – cartographic school. A challenging school of minerology, metallurgy and chemistry operated at the mine for six years (1763-1769) by the decree of Maria Theresa.

It is not an overstatement to say that Maria Theresa effectively made the then half illiterate Slovene nation literate by introducing the reforms of general education system. Only after the school reform in 1774 the quality three-year main school was introduced. It was marked as one of the best in the land during the reign of Maria Theresa and her successor Josef II.

The branched system of education in Idrija was enhanced through the subsequent periods on these foundations. The citizens of Idrija had organised and supported the initial independent secondary school classes on their own several times until the Idrija town authorities used their diplomatic skill to persuade the government to establish the non-classical secondary school, thus marking the emperor Franc Josef’s 70th birthday in 1901. That is how the remote imperial relative of Maria Theresa is at least indirectly well-deserved for the establishment of the non-classical secondary school, the forerunner of the present Jurij Vega Grammar School Idrija.

The Idrija Non-classical Secondary School was the first secondary school of its kind at the beginning of the 20th century where the Slovene language prevailed over the German language. The school distinguished itself by the enviable quality. It had the most modern classrooms and studies, the well-resourced library and predominantly outstanding teachers, every third of whom achieved a doctor’s degree. The school’s reputation was soon spread far and wide, especially over Carniola and Littoral and attracted many students from distant places.

Janez Kavčič