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HIS HEIRS

by
ARTHUR J. DIERS

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The Good King and His Heirs

In June of 2005, I flew into Prague, the threshold, taxied past the tall crumbling condominiums built by the Russians where most of the Czechs now live and entered the grand old city. It was exhilarating to leave my cares in Chicago and feel free in a place where young people abound. With great anticipation I set off for Wenceslas Square. There before the great statue of their ancient hero in 1989 a million Czechs cheered as Vaclav Havel declared them free from Russian domination. Perhaps I would find it liberating here in Prague, also. The Velvet Revolution triumphed with great force and without bloodshed. How was such a breakthrough possible?

With a light step I strolled down the square, and was astonished to come upon Superman. There was Superman twenty feet high, decked in his uniform, a big "S" on chest, yellow, of course, surrounded by red, a massive physical specimen in full flight charging at lightning speed—directly into the ground. What is this? Our American hero meeting his death on the streets of Prague? How could this be liberating? I was to learn that the very earth of Prague could

defeat the mightiest powers in the world because it had done so many times before. But how? How could this little people prevail with its own blood dripping and its foes grounded in their own righteousness?

This all suited my own emotional challenge. After six months of 24/7 caretaking of my dear wife, Evie, it was a great relief to be away. How liberating to have a few days respite. The last time I planned a trip she broke her hip three days before, so I couldn't go. I suspected that she unconsciously did it to keep me around. So this time I made all the arrangements for her (someone to be with her all the time, visitors every day) and didn't tell her. My relief was mixed with guilt. In Prague I felt liberated, yet under the tyranny of that dread disease.

In many ways Prague paralleled my situation. Maybe I could learn from Prague how to manage. Some old legends carried the weight of how to manage difficult situations. At least five historic-mythic characters are stamped on the Czech psyche. They are the backbone of the Czech fortitude which enables them to live under tyranny and emerge not in bitterness or in rebellion, but in freedom. *That spirit is just what I need. I need to find a way to endure the tyranny of this disease in such a way that Evie and I can come out OK.*

The first of these characters is Labussa. She is described by Alois Jirasek, who wrote about her in *Old Czech Legends* in the 1890s. He starts with the patriarch, Czech, who led his people into this promised land. After a golden age, his son Krok died leaving no sons, so the elders chose the youngest of his three daughters, Labussa, to rule, and she did so with a compassionate spirit. She was "beautiful, unworldly and serious, and was able to see what was hidden from other people's ken and to prophesy."¹ However, after a time, old men organized to challenge the rule of a woman. Eventual-

ly, Labussa acceded. She followed her magic white horse westward and near a little river met a plowman named Premysl, which means "the thoughtful or the cunning."² Ignoring these warnings, she married him.

One day the elders and the royal couple were standing on the high cliff overlooking the whole land, a place called Vysehrad. It is an inspiring place to this day, it inspired me on the bright day I was there. The spirit grabbed Labussa, she lifted her hand and pointed upriver and across the stream crying out: "I see a great city whose fame will touch the stars." She led the entourage to the place where Hradcany Castle now stands and commanded them to build a castle to be named Praha, which we anglicize as Prague. It means threshold. "Just as princes and army commanders bow their heads when they enter a house, " she proclaimed, "so will they bow their heads to my city. It will be honored, noble, and respected by all the world."³

And so it is, a great and spiritual city. As I stand looking over it, with its hundred spires beneath the imposing Hradcany castle with the great towers of St. Vitus pointing above all from the great high mountain, I can feel the spirituality to which the prophetess pointed, the being on the threshold of the wondrous, the primal. The generative power of the union of the strong prophetic virgin with the sturdy, cunning Slavic plowman moves like a palpable force among the towers, bridges, castles, libraries, universities, and monasteries emanating from the various centuries. *The scene makes me think of Evie, my gorgeous, spirited wife lending a similar glow to my life even as she fades.*

The women were understandably restive about the shift from matriarchy to patriarchy. They fomented rebellion against the men, who disrespected and insulted them. They

organized—the strong to fight as warriors, the lovely to use their wiles to seduce men to easily kill them. Nearly all—women and men—died. The women were ever so close to victory, but tragically lost. The Czechs lose out time after time to tyrants, because they have no heart for being equally as cruel as their oppressors, and are not as strong. They are left to retain their dignity in whatever way they can while living with their oppressors. *We both hope to retain some dignity as Evie endures the ravages of this oppressive disease.*

They nearly all died. That too is Prague's legacy. It is a dark legacy of bloody civil warfare as in the War of the Maidens and wars with greater powers. It is a bloody legacy visually symbolized by the gardens of the Wallenstein Palace, so beautifully restored for our eyes. General Albrecht Wallenstein had been a mercenary for whatever power wanted dirty work done, and he was so good at it that he was able to build a palace in every major city in Europe.⁴ He was so successful that he became as powerful as his employers, a dangerous path which led to his assassination. His garden is splendid. It has lovely lawns with fountains and statues and flowers blocked out after the French manner, and at one side of the garden is a vast area called the Cave. It is a black and dark gray wall of jagged stone, a hundred yards long and a hundred feet high. It is forbidding, and it reminds of the dark side of Prague. Much evil has been done here. Along with the glorious destiny, there is the black cave. I can see Albrecht standing in his extraordinary garden looking directly at the black cave. It must be liberating to stand in the light and at the same time look straightforwardly at one's dark side. *Maybe it's happening to me in Prague. Evie has been suffering from a particularly nasty, aggressive Parkinsonian condition called Lewy body dementia. My*

delight in her beauty is matched with a terrible rage about her illness.

After Labussa, the next great leader who lives in the hearts of the Czechs is Wenceslas—the Good King who gives this essay its title. He lived from 903 to 935. His life and his death forged the uneasy compromise with the Christian Germans that has been his people's destiny.⁵ Wenceslas was the elder of twins. His brother's name was Bratislaw. His father, Duke Wratislaw, was a Premysl and a Christian, while his mother Dragomir (who was a wicked mother, not a wicked step-mother) was a Slavic non-Christian who favored his brother. Wenceslas was closest to his father's mother, Ludmilla (the ever-loving grandmother) and was raised by her as a Christian. Wratislaw, the father, was a good leader, popular with the people, but died when Wenceslas was in his early teens. Dragomir became the regent and, opposing Christianity, had Ludmilla, her mother-in-law, strangled so that she herself could dominate Wenceslas and rid him of his Christian ways. But when Wenceslas came of age, the people insisted that he take over the leadership of the country and maintain his Christian convictions, which is what he was inclined to do, putting his mother in her place.

He ruled "wisely, justly and mercifully."⁶ He traveled throughout the land to listen to the little man's needs and responded to them. He urged the wealthy to reach out to their fellow citizens who were less fortunate, and to be generous with them, as he was. He and his aides would go out to visit the most needy even in the worst weather, to bring them food, firewood and clothing. He was loved by all—all but some of his own family members.

On the international front, he made friends with the supremely powerful Otto I, emperor of Germany. (It was a lit-

tle like an Indian chief befriending George Bush.) He placed his duchy under the protection of Germany and opened the door to more German influence in the land, more German priests, the Latin rite in the Church and much else. But he was able to maintain sufficient autonomy for his people. The emperor proclaimed him king of Bohemia, an honor which his people wholeheartedly approved. He reigned for more than ten years, maintaining felicitous relationships with other nations, the dukes in his kingdom, the burgers, the poor, the Jews, and even sought to improve relations with his mother and brother. But they would not stop their scheming. One day Bratislaw invited Wenceslas to a banquet, a celebration purported to honor him. He could hardly refuse. It was a set-up. Wenceslas was turned on by the honor guard, was slaughtered, hacked to pieces, and in case that wasn't enough, dirt was shoveled on him to bury him on the spot. Within three years Bratislaw, who became king, became a Christian to save his own hide, repented his deed, and had his brother given a grand funeral. Wenceslas's remains were interred with great ceremony in the bowels of St. Vitus, where we can climb down, down, down, and visit them today. Wenceslas died on September 28, 935.

On that day, the day of Wenceslas's martyrdom, the Czechs celebrate their biggest national holiday. Wenceslas commands the square which bears his name. He rests in stone upon a gigantic horse on the lawns of Vysehrad, overlooking the kingdom that still reveres him. His generous rule shapes the hopes and dreams of the Czechs. His concern for the little man resounds in the Czechs' fondness for communism without tyranny, reflected in the last election. His martyrdom reflects the suffering his people of hope must endure. *Wenceslas reminds me of my extraordinarily gener-*

ous wife. She has added a richness to my life that only her kindness could give. Can the tragic destruction of her life bring hope as the tragic death of Wenceslas does to the people of Prague? I have my doubts.

The next leader to capture the hearts of the Czechs is Charles IV, who was born Vaclav, son of King John of Luxembourg, in 1316.⁷ His mother, Eliska, a proud Premysl, was loved by the people who expected her to continue the charitable tradition, but her husband John would have none of it. He wasn't interested in Prague, didn't mind making enemies, and only returned to Prague "to squeeze more money from his burgers and arrange knightly jousts" for his personal pleasure. In his absence, his wife garnered more and more political support. So he correctly recognized her as a political threat and imprisoned her and their son at a fortress called Loket. There they lived in a dungeon, which, as Vaclav recalled, had "a little light coming in from a hole in the ceiling." Vaclav was three years old. They were in this dungeon for four years, until he was seven. (We can tell our children and grandchildren that story when they complain of deprivation.) Not only that, but at the age of seven his mother left, escaping to Bavaria. He was never to see her again. In spite of that, his affection and loyalty to her persisted.

His father shipped him off to France. There he was "educated by the diplomat and theologian Pierre de Rosieres, who was to become Pope Clement the VI of Avignon." When he came of age his father assigned him the job of attending to the king's interests in Italy. He provided protection for the Italians, for which they either paid dearly or had to fight. He learned to lead men in battle and deal with many attempts on his life. One morning his French Christian up-

bringing prompted him to skip breakfast before taking Holy Communion. His devotion was rewarded when three of his fellows died of food poisoning. In the main, however, he enjoyed his time in Italy, with its lively people, beautiful women, good male companionship, and fine Italian wine. He was a youth having a high old time.

After a few years, he decided to return to Prague by himself, on his own. Prague was in a mess, Hradcany in ruins. He quietly slipped into town and took lodging in an Old Town house which had belonged to his mother. His French wife joined him, and he began networking among the local barons and burghers, monks and peasants, repossessing royal property which his father had foolishly pawned. When his father caught wind of his activities, he was sent off to govern Moravia. Six years later he became king when his father went blind and later died in the battle of Crecy in 1346.

His rise to power was phenomenal. He knew all the major players in Europe and was liked by them. He could deal shrewdly with the Avignon papacy. Within four years he was elected Roman king twice and was soon crowned King of Italy. It was obvious to all that his ruling city should be Rome, but he made Prague his capital. Before he died in 1378, his mother's city was a "wondrous heart of European power, religious feeling, creativity and erudition."⁸ Labussa's vision was made real.

Charles opened the boundaries between segments of the city and built the great bridge that now bears his name. He built the entirely New Town for expanded markets. The mighty towers were built. The castle was renovated and enlarged, and St. Vitus expanded. Prague became the seat of an archbishop. His university became a magnet for faculty and students throughout the world. Monasteries were

founded, and Vysehrad became a shrine to Wenceslas and Labussa.

The glow of this grand period pervades the city and its spirit. The Charles Bridge is the center of this memory, now alive with its statuary, crowds of visitors listening to jazz, with artists creating and hawking their wares and general merriment. I viewed the castle and cathedral, the bridges, the towers, the mystical and mythical statues from this bridge over the Vltava. They bear witness to the cosmopolitan, learned, commercially active, traditional European center of a former time—yet still present. I was awed by this grand past. The Czechs remember it and wear its aura. *It resonates with me that I have had a grand and colorful life with Evie. She was a powerful woman before this intruder arrived. She will live large in my memory as Charles has for Prague. She won't survive either, but she will live on.*

The fourth character whose life has been seared into the memory of all Czechs is Jan Hus.⁹ Hus stands tall in the middle of the Old Town Square with compatriots and a mother and child praying for renewal. He stands as a symbol of resistance to foreign domination. He was born in 1372 in Husinec, a small village. His mother wanted him to become a priest (as did mine) so he studied Latin and went off to Charles University when he was eighteen. (I was sixteen.) He was a sickly fellow who was pleased to get a job doing janitorial and kitchen work for his room and board. (I worked in the cafeteria.) He plugged away at his studies in the middle of turmoil in the university. There were conflicts between German and nationalist faculty, and between English and classical philosophy. We all know about faculty wars. This one was even more enthusiastic than most because it was at the heart of national and international conflicts.

Many Oxford students came to Prague, bringing Wycliffe's ideas with them.

Hus was not inclined to challenge authority, and was not passionate about any of these issues. Eventually he was appointed priest of Bethlehem Chapel, a center of reform and nationalism in Prague. He was thought to be a safe choice. The chapel was a large, austere, simple building with a modest pulpit and low ceiling, in contrast with elaborate churches in the neighborhood. I wanted to see it and suggested it several times to our guide. She was adamant, informing me that it was so uninteresting that it didn't warrant the time it would take to get there. It must, indeed, be very uninteresting. His congregation grew by leaps and bounds. He, like many of his peers, worked out of the Augustinian tradition, and it was obvious to him that the Catholic Church needed to be responsive to Christ and the Scriptures in order to be true to itself. This was not a radical view, but it happened to coincide with a nationalistic spirit in Prague restive with foreign intervention.

The Church, however, was a little like modern corporations of our day. It was where the money was. The brightest young men sought to qualify for positions in the Church because of the prestige and money that accrued. When the Church was pinched for money it moved toward irregular practices. Confiscate the wealth of the Jews. Pressure the dukes with a higher tax. Move to extract it from those less well off by selling indulgences which would give the believer, his family and friends a step up on the way to heaven. It's like the lottery, only with the payoff coming after death. Such a campaign was getting into full swing in Prague, and Hus thought it highly questionable. He could find no authority for this practice in Christ or the Scriptures, and

sought to bring this to the attention of the authorities who could do something about it. He naively believed that if he could talk to the authorities high enough in the hierarchy he would be heard and the matter would be rectified. He saw that he was being painted with Wycliffe's brush (Wycliffe having been branded a heretic), but knew it was a distortion and was pleased to get a hearing at the Council of Constance in 1415 where he could get everything straightened out. He got there only to find that he could not get a hearing, was arrested, was declared a heretic, was degraded in a most painful public humiliation ceremony, worse than the perp walk, dragged naked out of town, tied to a stake next to a garbage dump, and burned, singing until the flames consumed him. "The executioners broke his bones and his skull with clubs . . . carefully searched for his heart which they put on a sharpened club to 'roast' in the flames. Finally, they swept up the ashes, carried them to the Rhine, flowing nearby, and threw them into the waters. It was July 6, 1415."¹⁰ He must have been a real threat.

This set off the Hussite Revolution in which the radical Hussites slaughtered the Roman priests and the moderate Hussites. The favor was reciprocated until they were threatened by foreigners. Then the Hussite factions united to kill off the foreigners, after which they returned to slaughtering each other, burning churches, cloisters, monasteries, libraries, destroying religious artifacts—even destroying Vysehrad, which Charles IV had so lovingly restored. The radical Hussites won and Prague entered a period of puritanical discipline with "little fun and even less joy."

But the naively optimistic and quietly persistent conviction that the truth will prevail—the spirit of Jan Hus against foreign intervention—is alive and well in Prague. There was

the quiet persistence of the Prague people pushing steadily and without rebellion against the oppressive Russian authority in the 1969 Prague Spring. They were brutally put down, but with some burning martyrs and continued pressure there was a quiet change of power twenty-one years later. That may seem slow to us, but in Czech time it's fast.

Now the European Union is trying to make big strides toward increased unification of the European states. Vaclav Klaus, the current president of the Czech Republic, speaking last July at the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations at the Conrad Hilton, followed in Jan Hus's steps. He said, to paraphrase, "Let's consider Europe not becoming a monolithic state. Let's consider a confederation within which each nation, including the Czech Republic, can have its own sense of itself controlling its own destiny." That truth is a bombshell in the current debate, especially since France and the Netherlands have voted against the monolithic trend. It is typically Czech to blast away quietly with the truth.

Hus had a propensity to speak an inconvenient truth. *It was also one of Evie's surprising characteristics. She was good at coming up with a spontaneous, startling and often jarring truth—usually without malice. Sometimes, like Hus, she was absolutist in her thinking. But with her the upshot was most often beneficial, always a little fresh.* Hus reminds us again of what certainty about truth can do when pursued with the righteous conviction that it is God's truth. All sorts of unintended consequences spring forth. This is dangerous, explosive stuff, as we know, as the bombs thrown around in God's name go off every day. Every day we're confronted with another color alert.

Another leader dear to the heart of the Czechs is Emperor Rudolph the II, who dealt with political and religious

conflicts by ignoring them and seeking another way, a mystical way. Rudolph was born in 1552, the third child of Maximilian II and his wife the Empress Maria of Spain. He was "delicate, different, fragile, sensitive to light and noise and discord."¹¹ But his parents were always fighting—she a Catholic and he in constant conflicts with the Church and with his wife. Rudolph retreated into himself and, under the guidance of his tutor, Anger Gusbek, a devoted peacenik, studied plants and animals in his father's zoo and gardens, filled with botanic and zoological specimens from throughout the world. With them he grew to develop an interior conviction that there were harmonies between heaven and earth which only his sensibilities could discern.

When he was eleven years old, his father gave in to his mother's insistence that he be educated in Spain in the court of his uncle, King Phillip. There he was made to feel at home, and had a happy time playing, hunting and riding with his brother and members of the royal family, including Isabella. The haughty, remote, ceremonial, severe style of the Spanish court suited the reclusive boy. It gave him a way to protect his sensitive self. He was horrified to view the burning of Protestant heretics, but was drawn like a magnet to a romantic mysterious monastery at Montserrat. In a monastery in Cordova, the singing, the spiritual exercises, the fasting, the simplicity, the ceremonial rituals overwhelmed him. He screened out the Catholicity and attended to the mystical, much to his uncle's dismay.

When Rudolph returned to Vienna, his father was put off by his haughty manner, but felt confident that his basic good spirit would prevail and facilitated his son's political career step by step. He saw to it that upon his death in 1575, Rudolph at the age of twenty-five became Roman king and

Roman emperor. It was quite a transition for him. He had led such a sheltered life. He spoke little, preferring to listen.

First thing, he moved his government to Prague, which he called "The Hub of the Universe." It had the right kind of mystique for him, a sense of destiny, removed from the intrigues of Vienna, away from his pretentious siblings. He followed his own lights, keeping his mother at bay, a recurring theme with royalty. He collected art and supported artists from all over the world. "Apart from paintings, sculptures and precious stones, Rudolph . . . collected clocks . . . rare books, ancient manuscripts, coins, exquisite plants . . . exotic animals kept in a managerie close to the castle." He was often ill, and sometimes shut away for months, lost in the mire of melancholia. He had very few trusted advisers, mainly a chaplain, Father Pistorius, who, like Madonna, became a Christian student of the Kabbalah and combined wise council with a commitment to Rudolph's views.

Rudolph did not wish to bother with the confused affairs of state. Generally, he thought it best to do nothing about those things. "He believed that the secrets of the universe are locked deep in nature around us, awaiting only for the adepts to discover them so that all mankind may benefit from them." His court physician, Dr. Hajek, facilitated his interest in alchemy and the occult. The metals in his mines, he believed, could have magical powers. He studied the work of those attempting to change metals into gold and brought the most talented to Prague to work in laboratories in the Golden Lane beside the castle walls. The labs are there to this day. The object was not to get rich. I had always thought that alchemy was about getting rich. But it turns out that Rudolph wanted to use it to cure ills, to find ways in which the powers of heaven and earth can be mixed in

such a way that harmony prevails in the world. When strife occurs, Rudolph would expect his own solitary devotion along with his scientists' work to solve the problem from within. The greatest astronomers of the age, Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler, were brought to live in his court so that they could contribute to this great vision. With Rudolph's support they made extraordinary scientific advances appreciated to this day. It's actually very modern to try to get to what is basic in the universe in order to transform it.

Of course, over time those who were dealing with realpolitik, the Church and his brother Mathias, succeeded in pushing Rudolph aside in 1611, though they could not dethrone him. By doing what is common to many governments, doing as little as possible as slowly as possible, following his profound commitment to procrastination, Rudolph reigned for thirty-five years. His brother could hold the crown for only three. The robber barons had their work cut out for them. It took more than five hundred wagons to carry away the plundered works of art that Rudolph had collected, and still warehouses were filled with the lesser stuff.

Evie, my wife, was like Rudolph—devoted to mystery in life, had premonitions which came true, let her intuition guide her irrespective of the facts, welcomed beauty, noticing it in the most unlikely places and treasuring it like the hoarder Rudolph was. She would proceed ignoring social and political considerations. Such a fine mysterious woman.

A contemporary of Rudolph's, another dominating figure in fact and fiction, was Rabbi Judah Loew. He was a pre-eminent scholar of his age, a conservative man of great wisdom who held to the transcendent value and power of the Torah, and used some of the mystical language of the Kab-

balah to express his views. The rabbi is said to have created the Golem, with his

magical powers, a near human being, made of loam, employed as a servant in the Old New Synagogue. He swept up, rang the bell, and did menial chores. The rabbi had forgotten a particular prayer while creating the Golem, so the Golem became more powerful than his creator. The only way to discipline him was to slip an amulet into his mouth, a magic sedative to keep him quiet and doing good. One day, distracted by his daughter's illness, he forgot to put the amulet in the Golem's mouth . . . the Golem was loose and raging, shaking the old walls, and the lights were tumbling down as though the world had come to an end. The rabbi hurried to put the amulet back in the Golem . . . and subsequently he became docile and was put in storage in the attic of the synogogue.¹²

The Golem became a figure of fear, frequently returning to the streets of Prague. A contemporary explanation would include post-traumatic stress disorder. With so many suffering so much trauma, the unexpected eruption of the terrifying would seem inevitable, as though out of nowhere. Our group witnessed the reappearance of the Golem in the grand puppet show, a long-standing, prized reality, performed several times a week in the National Theater. *The terror reverberates through me, ripples from the emotional turmoil of the last years. When there's too much trouble, there's terror.*

The movement of the mysterious is in Prague. The form of an incredibly obese woman, a little girl about to fall off a wall, a monstrous ghost, a series of half-men, a dwarf—hundreds of curious figures await, all around the city. Devotion to unconventional truth, to that which the practical powers cannot see, the vision of some other worldly power that is to

be searched for but is not known, that will create peace and harmony or mayhem—that is in Prague's air. It is in Dvořák's New World Symphony, on Prague streets, and has captured the imagination of visitors from the West—including myself. *I cannot help but think that the terrifying eruptions of the Golem will return.*

During and after the Thirty Years War in the seventeenth century, during which most Czechs died, the Hapsburgs ruling from Vienna and the Catholic Church guided by Rome engaged in the excesses of the Counter Reformation. Prague had a reputation of being a rebellious place and was treated accordingly.

How did Prague get this reputation as a "rebellious place"? Despite the overwhelming presence of the Church in all aspects of Czech life, the Slavic roots of Czech and Labussa were at their core. In some way they were fundamentally apart from western Christianity from the beginning because of who they were. They were always on the fringe. Prague is, after all, the capital of Bohemia, one of three provinces that make up the Czech Republic. It is the origin of our definition of "bohemian." The beatniks of Greenwich Village were bohemian because they found their life apart from the mainstream and somehow threatened it. That made me realize another reason why I was so deeply moved by this city. I grew up in a minister's family, went to a Lutheran college, engaged in seven years of post-graduate studies in Christian theology, and then found myself in a deep depression because somehow at my core I was apart from that. I had to work my way out from the depths of myself apart from churchly things in order to live. I was lucky that that happened to me in the twentieth century. Because Freud had intervened and with Evie's constant

support, it wasn't as dangerous for me as it was for the Czechs.

Though I managed to avoid it, the Church came down on the Czechs. The most striking symbol of that period that I saw was in St. Nicholas Church in the Mala Strana, beneath the Castle. It is a magnificent classic baroque structure. There in the chancel, high in the middle, where the figure of the Christ or a cross is usually placed, instead is a thirty-foot-high commanding figure of the pope in full regalia. On either side of the chancel are saints, twenty feet high, holding their spears to the throats of the citizens cowering beneath. The brochure says it is little devils that are being put down, but they look like local citizens to me, and history is on my side.

The primitive Slavic psyche of the Czechs may have always experienced western Christianity as alien. But the many old monuments, churches, monasteries, libraries, and universities built by the Church continue to be highly valued as part of the tradition of the Old Europe, Charles's empire. They are filled with music every day. Many concerts are advertised. Mozart is especially honored, since he wrote and conducted the opening of *Don Giovanni* in Prague: he is given the honor of becoming increasingly drunk on the world-famous Prague beer as he conducts his opera in the Puppet Theater.

How do the Czechs survive this abuse? *How do I?* They are overwhelmed by one tyranny after another. How do they deal with this? They must have some tricks at hand. *I have tried some of them.* Outright rebellion doesn't seem to work. In 1618, they threw the leadership of the oppression out of the window (defenestration it was called), but that was ineffective, since the scoundrels landed on a dung heap and survived to begin the crushing of the Czechs for hundreds

of years. Many left the country. Berwyn (Illinois) was a favorite destination.

It is sometimes helpful to ignore the tyrant, avoid as much as possible, refuse to get into power struggles. Concentrate on safe things, staying away from politics. Do music, sculpture, poetry, literature. Jazz clubs, concerts, puppetry, museums thrive. Artist colonies abound. I found it a relief to go to a splendid Gershwin concert in an old tower hall after a dinner of duck and dumplings, and then there was the jazz concert in the night club where Bill Clinton had played the sax with Vaclav Havel and Vaclav Klaus. *It's a great escape for a moment. We all enjoy our little comforts away. Here I have a little respite.*

Mysticism and madness are ways of dealing with repression. When a people cannot in good conscience conform and cannot out of fear rebel, it can go mad, or escape into mysticism. I've mentioned here the weirdness that is everywhere in Prague. *I've felt it with the fear, anxiety, rage, vigilance, sleeplessness which comes with crisis after crisis. There's something to be said for having the freedom to go a little mad, in a place where there is a certain normalcy to madness.*

The experience of alienation can be a refuge for some. Kafka found the expression of alienation a creative force. Try as he might he cannot find justice in the *Trial* and cannot have contact with the centers of power in the *Castle* despite extraordinary efforts. He's on the outside trying desperately to get in, but he is apart and cannot. He finds meaning in a vain struggle, *as do I*.

To be obscure is to be safer. Prague made itself sufficiently obscure to avoid being bombed in the Second World War. I was astounded to view the extraordinary Czech art treasures on display in the spacious Museum of Art, which

was originally a trade center built by the Communists. This work has not been shared with the West. Kafka refused to have his writing published. It took Max Brod, his friend, many years to finally convince him to do so. We have heard of Dvořák, Vaclav Havel, Miles Kundera, Miles Foreman, Franz Kafka, Franz Werfel, Smetana—but how many more? Not very many. Obscurity is a protection. *Few knew that I was the object of Evelyn's paranoid attacks, sleeplessness and crippling anxiety, and that was all to the good. It feels safer when few know. We have all learned to act as though everything is all right when it is not.*

Good humor in the face of an oppressor sometimes works. Jaroslav Hasek wrote *The Good Soldier Svejk*, in which Svejk, the little man, is constantly interacting with bureaucrats. His big mouth regularly gets him into big trouble. But the employers cannot fire him and the police cannot arrest him because he is so enthusiastic in his praise of and his obeisance to the Austrian dynasty and the Church. "It is difficult to say whether Svejk is cunning enough to offer his resistance without resistance or whether he is a simple moron."¹³ He's a little like Woody Allen. *We have all enjoyed silly moments that emerge from the tragic. It's a welcome relief. Evie and I would laugh with glee when she would fall so expertly that nothing was broken—this time.*

It is especially wonderful that after hundreds of years of oppression, the Czechs could take to a parliamentary democracy. The Czechs did not tear each other apart as many other nations have, as Iraq and Russia and a number of African countries have. It is unusual. It happened after the Habsburg Dynasty crumbled after the First World War. It was done under the leadership of Tomas Masaryk. They did it again after being dominated by the Nazis and by the

Communists in 1989 under the leadership of Vaclav Havel. A vibrant parliamentary democracy with true freedom emerged after hundreds of years of living under tyranny. How was this possible?

In my view, and this is the point of this essay, it could only have happened because the Czechs had sustained their common language and their common myths. The figures of Labussa, the matriarch and Slavic prophet; Wenceslas, the good and generous king, who really did things for the little man; Charles, the powerful emperor who respected all and helped all to thrive; Hus's devotion to the truth against foreign intruders; Rudolph's mystic vision; and Judah Loew's Golem. These are internalized images of the Good King that make parliamentary democracy possible, just as our internalized images of the Constitution, the Founding Fathers and Abraham Lincoln have sustained our democracy.

Tomas Masaryk was the leader of the golden age of parliamentary democracy in Prague.¹⁴ He was born in 1850. His statue stands beside the great palace overlooking all of Prague from the heights of Hradcany. Our splendid guide, Hanna, was honored to be asked to have her picture taken with him. He rose from humble beginnings in a small village near the border of Slovakia and Moravia. He apprenticed as a locksmith, then took a job with a blacksmith with the eventual hope of learning veterinary skills. A priest taught him Latin and insisted that his parents send him to a proper school, so he entered the gymnasium in Brno, where he had to tutor to eat. When he was kicked out of school for knocking heads with the headmaster, his employer got him into the Akademisches Gymnasium where future presidents and ministers of Austria were educated. There he enjoyed a classical education, especially favoring the

study of Plato and British empiricists. He was seriously religious and all his life sought to find the right church for himself. He received his PhD in philosophy at the age of twenty-six and went on to Leipzig where he attended lectures by Wilhelm Wundt and Edmund Husserl.

Mysaryk was a very straight-laced person, not interested in sex or women until he began reading some studies in sexual behavior and met and was smitten by Charlotte from Brooklyn. He fell head over heels in love with her and married her in a Unitarian Church in Brooklyn. It was a happy marriage. They had five children. He admired her and took her name as his middle name. He is known as Tomas Garrigue Masaryk. He always thought that she had an intelligence greater than his own. She was certainly strong and determined. In her youth she practiced so hard that she ruined her hands in her determination to become a concert pianist. She led him in the fight against intolerance and for the woman's right to vote.

He was not as interested in scholarly work as he was in discussing political and social issues with students, so he taught for sixteen years without a promotion. He was elected to the parliament in Vienna for a two-year term (1891-93) where he learned the ins and outs of politics. He taught a course at the University of Chicago in 1902, and a statue of him stands on the Midway.

He gained notoriety for his sobriety and honesty. He was ready to take up unpopular causes. If he didn't believe the authenticity of documents showing Czech literature to be older than German, he said so. He was hated for that. If people (especially the Jews) were accused and convicted of so-called "ritual murders," he would speak loudly for the unfairness of bringing unscientific ideas into the courtroom.

Hostile demonstrators would emerge outside his house where Charlotte would courageously confront them and talk them down. He received most public recognition when, after being elected to another term in parliament, he challenged Austria's interventions in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In a dramatic case he showed incriminating documents to be forgeries, causing Emperor Franz Josef to back down.

In 1914, he left the country when his life was in danger. Charlotte stayed behind with their children, where she was persecuted because her husband's activities were regarded as traitorous. Her daughter was imprisoned, and their son treated badly after being conscripted. She did not recover from these bad times, became ill and depressed, and died in 1923.

Masaryk spent four years traveling to Paris, London, New York, Moscow, Siberia and Washington, conferring with "foreign correspondents, ambassadors, prime ministers, and presidents to organize a new republic, which, for a long time, existed only in the realm of his Platonic ideas. On October 28, 1918, he took over power from the imperial authorities in an orderly ceremony with the entire Czech population behind him."¹⁵

For the next sixteen years Masaryk presided over the turbulent Czech nation. The borders had to be settled. The Germans wanted parts of his land for themselves, as did the Magyars. The German Czechs had serious differences with the Czech Czechs. The Protestants and the Catholics had their issues. The Communist Party was a growing constituency. The Slovaks wanted their autonomy. As the Jews became more powerful in the affairs of state, anti-Semitism raised its ugly head. Masaryk had a way of channeling these disparate interests always toward what was best for the

Czech people as a whole. He preached fairness, hard work and love of country, especially hard work. Karl Popper writes: "Masaryk's Czechoslovakia was the most open of all societies ever to develop in Europe . . . what marvelous years!"¹⁶ This would not have been possible without the presence of the Good King and his heirs in the heads and hearts of all Czechs.

Soon after Masaryk retired, the Germans marched in and did their repressive thing, and after them the Russians, until 1989, when Vaclav Havel led the Czechs into the modern parliamentary democracy that they have today.

The Czechs press on, *as do I*, with the strength of the Good King and his heirs. Now they confront what they experience as the next tyrant—capitalism. Superman indeed. As for me, I'll make friends with Superman and let him carry me home.

I say goodbye to this liberated Prague, knowing that I have similar resources. My rich life with Evie, my sturdy forbears and good fortune early in life have given me the wherewithal to weather the storm, though who knows where it will lead. Who knows where Prague will go? Thanks to Prague for a much-needed break, reprieve from our great oppressor—Lewy body disease. It's amazing what a week of respite can do. Now I can't wait to get home. Even though she, like Prague, is fading rapidly and tragically. At times she, like Prague, is still gorgeous, still charming, still lively, still witty and thoughtful, still generous, still grand, still mysterious, still loved by all, still a great comfort to be with—with that wonderful smile. I can't wait to get back to the woman I love.

Notes

1. Peter Demetz, *Prague in Black and Gold* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), 4.

2. Ibid., 5.

3. Ibid.

4. 1. See "Wallenstein, Albrecht Wenzel Eusbius von," *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., for more on Wallenstein's adventurous life.

5. See Francis Merishman, "St. Wenceslaus," *Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. XI (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), 587, and "Wenceslaus I," *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., for more on Wenceslaus's life story.

6. Ace Collins, *Stories Behind the Best-loved Songs of Christmas* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 65.

7. See Demetz, 72-5, for a summary of his account of Charles's early life. The quoted materials in this paragraph and in the immediately succeeding paragraph are from this summary.

8. See Demetz, 75-100, for a description of Charles's many accomplishments.

9. This account of Hus's life relies heavily on Demetz, 130-45.

10. Demetz, 145.

11. Ibid., 179-223. Subsequent quotations regarding Rudolph are taken from these pages.

12. Ibid., 207-08.

13. Ibid., 348.

14. This account of Tomas Masaryk's early life is drawn from Demetz, 332-38.

15. Ibid., 338.

16. Quoted by Josef Novak in "The Legacy of TGM," http://old.hrad.cz/president/Masaryk/cv_uk.html.

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