

# The Heritage of Wenceslas\*

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While working on the portraits of the Czech saints I made pilgrimages to their graves, to the places where they lived. During these pilgrimages, that often led through paths along Czech rivers, many memories, dreams and thoughts passed through my mind. In conclusion of the whole work I feel obliged to offer the reader the contents of my meditations from my journeys in search of our saints, for they led me to the springs of the Czech land. I offer them to you, I do not force them on you, because personal beliefs should not be forced on anyone. Luckily it is not even possible.

It was clear to me that to a certain extent I was writing a historical book. Yet I felt more and more that, apart from considerable amateurishness (I am not a historical expert), I only partially follow the method used for writing historical works. At a certain point I have always left the usual paths and set out in an unusual direction of explanation. The tension between the usual view of a historian and my viewpoint forced me to think about history and historiography.

I realised that in order to understand history it is not enough to know all the facts and to be able, with the aid of a chain of causes and results, to explain the mechanism of the course of history. What is important is for us to understand and feel how we ourselves stand in the history of our nation, how the whole of historical experience is inscribed in us. Only in this way can we understand what is good for us and what harms us, what is our own, what we should do, what we should express. This great self-recognition, which we gain by again and again considering our lives and the life of the nation, can very often make things clear to us in details that seem apparently unimportant, yet symbolically plain. It seems to me that our saints point out remarkably well what Czech history is really about. I thought further about what our heritage is.

\*This is an edited version of the final chapter of an unpublished book by Petr Piřha, *Bohemia and Her Saints*. See the editorial in this issue of *RCL* for further information.

I acknowledge a double heritage, in which everything is contained: our mother tongue and our country. Our mother tongue, the way in which we express ourselves, was given us by our mothers. Who else could give us the instrument of expression, and so self-birth, but she who gave us birth? Our mother tongue, in which we were educated, forms the space of our thought, in which we grow up. It is the maternal embrace from which we look at the world, and later maternal protection, when we enter it. We return to it when we do not understand and are wounded. Our mother tongue contains for us in its very own way the inherent wisdom with which we play as children in the form of nursery rhymes, and as adults we find it in the true sense of words, that now and then through their symbolic meaning, like the focus of a lens, light up an idea for us. Our mother tongue is also what links us together and differentiates us from other nations. It is an instrument of understanding with which we speak amongst ourselves, and a foreigner who does not know the language is excluded. Our mother tongue is inherently our own, like a quality that distinguishes us and gives us our identity, because it is the expression of our opinion, our own view of the world, our deepest being. Many nations take great care of their mother tongue, greater care than we do. But probably nowhere is the link between the mother tongue and the national existence so deeply felt as in our country. Care for the language appears so many times in our history as a fundamental struggle. The fight for our own liturgical language, the history of the Kralice Bible, which is the treasury of the language, Comenius's interest in the language when he feared national destruction, and the linguistic character of the national awakening are proof of this. But however important the matter of language is in our history, language cannot of course be declared the only sign of difference or the only defining factor of national self-determination.

In the same way our second heritage, our country, is not just a background, the external space of our lives, but again something special to us. Something that we belong to and that, of course, as part of the whole, we carry in basic characteristics within ourselves. Our country, the heritage of our fathers — *patria* —, the fatherland, is not merely territory held, but in the first place the soil in which we have our roots and which we till. The life of the nation that has grown up here over the centuries is expressed essentially in its laws and rights. The customs and laws of the land are inalienable not because we have invented them, but because we have raised them from the land and expressed its inner order by legislation. This order is not something external that we are confronted with, but something inherited from our fathers, that constitutes us and protects us. Just as in our language we feel foreign words to be foreign, even though we introduce them

advantageously into the whole language organism, so we feel instilled opinions as foreign and the manners of foreigners are a heavy burden to us.

Without committing the errors of romantic enthusiasm and superficial association, we should now and then gaze at the Bohemian countryside, for it is a place to which we are deeply related, and in this relationship we obtain our inner space and dimensions. It is the same as in a temple with its reality which is unexpressed but subconsciously present, and in a certain sense even expressed and prepared. All temples of all times are an expression of a certain idea, which is given by the proportions of the building. Thus the church is a measure of faith. The feeling of settled calm that people find here is not only a feeling, because in the space of a church we really gain a kind of all-pervading imitation of the same proportionality and the same tension that govern the building of the temple. The temple of the nation is in the most fundamental sense of the word its country. Much is certainly changing in nature. Gone are the splendour of deep forests, wide meadows and crystal waters. The basic deployment, the curve of the horizon remains. Our horizons are the same as were those of our most ancient ancestors. To become acquainted with ourselves it is a good thing to gaze into the Bohemian landscape and consider what this picture tells us.

It is a peaceful landscape. Our country does not impose any hard tests on people. None of the elements here has the might of the gods, before which man appears as nothing. Nor do we find here any monumental wonder of the world. There is no sea here nor uncontrollable rivers, we have no great mountains nor earthquakes, we have no volcanoes nor destructive winds. Yet this quiet and entirely peaceful land is by no means flat. It has its calm, dynamic line, it has its strange, lonely, steeply towering erupted hills and still more mysterious sunken rivers, forming with their lives hidden cathedrals of stalactitic caves. The Bohemian landscape, apparently monotonous, is very surprising. It is remarkable that this landscape has a Baroque curve inscribed in it, into which the Baroque builders laid their buildings as into a bed prepared for them. The Bohemian landscape also has the well recognisable rearing Gothic line.

And the Bohemian landscape is bound up with certain vegetation, in which the lime tree stands out royally. This tree, which has been recognised as the symbol of the Czech land, probably truthfully expresses it. It is a tree whose leaves have the form of a heart, whose flowers smell delightful but not narcotic, the infusion of which comforts and cures. Its pollen is the basis of golden honey that gives strength, health and much delight to children. It is a tree from which violin makers can conjure a sweet-speaking instrument, and in whose

trunk the eyes of the carver perceive the form and face of statues. In this national symbol, as in the whole countryside, we feel something covertly spiritual, beautiful, noble, that is to be born.

The Czech land, our home, is our destiny. We can read the basis of this fate in its situation, from which our position can then be understood. That genius, the founder of Czech historiography Cosmas, noticed that our country is rich in the quantity of springs that form rivers which flow out of Bohemia, which is like a goblet or bowl, and become great streams in foreign lands. No great river enters our territory. Cosmas felt that this was full of meaning. Otherwise, laconic as he was, why should he have mentioned it! He felt it was the basis of that spiritual fertility that is special to the land and the nation. And then too he noticed that our country, standing on a watershed, and so dividing the spheres of the seas, stands at a crossroads of the ways and links the east with the west and the south with the north. This point of intersection is of course a more important centre than the centres of individual cultural spheres, in contrast to which Prague appears a small and insignificant town on the very periphery of interest, where really another world begins. The vision of the prophetess Libuše about a great city whose importance is undeniable and its survival obvious, is an expression of a deep consciousness of the key importance of the place in which we live. The continuity and permanence of Prague, that so powerfully affects foreigners with its layers of architectural styles in astounding historic integrity, is guaranteed by its position, which is a periphery and a centre. Prague, despite the rises and falls in its fortunes, remains in the mind of Europe a royal city, standing beside papal Rome, as opposed to imperial Byzantium and other cities that were adorned with an imperial glitter and then receded again amongst other leading towns. Prague is royal in its essence, through its inherent not its developed power, which has sunk into powerlessness as the wheel of fortune turns. Prague is royal even at the times of its deepest decline. Knowledge of the importance of Prague and Bohemia, resulting from their position, can be found at every step, among commanders, statesmen, historians, artists. 'Whoever holds Bohemia influences Europe,' say the rulers. 'Occupying Bohemia means opening up the road,' say the soldiers. 'Watch events in Bohemia, Bohemia is the heart of Europe,' say the artists, and this label has remained to Bohemia. It is by no means by chance that on a map of Europe stylised as the figure of a woman, engraved in 1610 — that is, before the Battle of the White Mountain — we find Bohemia indicated as a jewel on her breast, clearly outlined by its frame of mountains and with a silhouette of Prague churches. This gem reaches to the region of the figure's solar plexus which, according to the then generally

accepted anatomical-astrological explanations, is the very centre of vital strength, the decisive place in the whole body.

When we speak of the heart of Europe, we should realise more what the heart is. Is it the site of feelings? After all we love with the heart. The heart was degraded to being a place of feeling, of unreasoning transports and whims, only when reason became the sole recognised ruler. But the heart is the seat of wisdom. The heart is the true place of deep thought and knowledge. We contemplate in our hearts, we wish people good or ill from our hearts, we tell the truth from our hearts. The heart is the place from where love moderates the cool decisions of reason. And that is the place that is the basis of our living, because the heart carries our life even when we do not know it, in sleep. Also, like the life it bears, it is completely free. We cannot command it. We know from the beating of the heart that we are alive.

The heart is that organ that is awake in the deep nights, when the mind is lifted or gripped by dreams. The heart is not just a blood pump, but firstly the place from where blood carries life to the whole body and to where it returns tired, to be again encouraged and to continue its enlivening in another direction and be enabled again to carry life. The heart is all that, a hidden organ and the most precious, the pulse of which can be secretly heard everywhere. Without even realising what they are saying and doing, the bearers of powerful influences reach ever and again for Bohemia, to drink of its life, so as from here to rule the life of the whole of Europe.

So here we stand and we have to ask what task falls to us. We are people living on the periphery and in the centre of events. We can well ask the question as to where we really belong. To the west or to the east; are we a northern country or not? The opinion has been expressed — more than once — that it is senseless to play at independence. The talents that the nation has could be equally well applied in the framework of one of the great cultures, and in addition our literature would become available to the world public. This is unthinkable and impossible, because Bohemia is necessary in the framework of Europe, a quite clearly visible and independent organ, without which Europe cannot be Europe, because without this country it would fall into two parts. Bohemia is like a little transit zone between western and eastern Europe, such as is the lip on the human face between the skin and the mucous membrane, similar to both and yet different. Just as without the lips, with which we speak, taste and kiss, it is impossible to imagine the full life of man, so it is impossible to imagine the life of Europe without Bohemia. Bohemia, called the heart of Europe, penetrates the various parts of Europe just as man is penetrated by his mysterious soul, and enables the immaterial spirit to move the heavy body, to penetrate it so that

immaterial ideas should become reality. The task of the inhabitants of this country is to carry the spiritual life of Europe and it is their destiny to experience most deeply all its spiritual struggles, torments and depressions, to realise how disputes cause numbness in one and unreality in the other of its parts. It is a splendid task and an extremely difficult one.

The nation knows it, as can be seen from the fact that it is just in our historiography that the question is asked over and over again of the meaning of history. It is a question that is passionately debated and considered by the greatest of our thinkers and national leaders, as a question that concerns every Czech directly and concretely at all times. While in other nations it is a general philosophical question concerning all human history and solved quite abstractly, with us it is a vital question, quite concretely asked at the level of our actual national history.

As we see the meaning of a tree in that it develops and expresses the meaning of the seed, as we see the meaning of the life of an individual in that he fully expresses his specific qualities, so in the case of our nation we see its meaning in that it fulfils its task and destiny by expressing the fact that it is the heart and soul of Europe, the temple and depth of its wisdom. We see the meaning of our national history in that we fulfil the purpose of a bridge, that spans differences of opinion, the purpose of a bolt that maintains the wholeness of an arch built on differing columns, a heart so wise that it can preserve the integrity of so many various limbs and cause a current of life-giving love to flow through them. Many of our historians and philosophers have pointed out that the significance of Czech history is spiritual. This does not seem to me to be quite correct. The significance of our history is soulful. In the Czech land as in the depths of the soul lies the meaning that is to be expressed and clearly disclosed. Our history is the path of that expression, the ceaseless longing and search for a just government, i.e. the kingdom of the heart.

When Bohemia is compared to the soul and the heart, each of these has its own special meaning. The soul is not the same as the heart. The soul is the secret depth of human existence in which the sense of our being lies hidden and unexpressed. It is the depth of our possibilities and fruitfulness. The heart, in contrast, is the restlessness of our activity, its expression, realisation. In the heart, which is the site of true recognition, we apprehend and experience the treasures of our soul. The heart stands over the soul like a flame over a bowl of oil, or like a star over the waters. The existence of Bohemia, given by the very position of the country, is that depth in which is hidden the sense of Europeanism. Nothing can be added to it. The Bohemian rivers are a picture of this. The restless existence of the nation that lives here

corresponds to the heart over this soul. Just as the heart cannot be closed, but lives through the return of the flow of blood, so too the understanding of the sense of Europeanism that we find in the Czech people is given by the constant flow of European thought. The heart is not the brain, a place of bright, sharp, new thoughts and ideas. Bohemia is not original. Even its gentle landscapes without sharply defined features are an expression of this. But Bohemia as the heart of Europe is of course a genius in that it is a synthesis of knowledge that is based on firm simple intuition, that is founded in being. It is worthy of notice that the great Czech philosophers are not original, but at the same time they are not epigones. For they do not repeat foreign truths, but recognise them and express them as truths, that is as what is their own. It has sometimes happened that the Czech people have not understood their task of being the heart and tried to reach out for tasks that belong to the mind; this always ended badly.

Let us try once more to go through Czech history and find in it those features we have just been considering. Even in our mythology we find in the initial story about Libuše a tale about the establishment of law. In the quarrel between the brothers Chrudoš and Šťáhlav, Libuše's maternal, natural right is refused and the expression of the right of princes is called for. Přemysl takes over the rule, but the law he listens to is that heard from the virgin prophetess in her secret garden. The question of law and the administration of the country comes up again in the fables about the maidens' war and about Horymír. What is fundamental and important for us is that the most natural thing, a country with its own laws, is first expressed at the moment of a quarrel between brothers, and that the basis of the legal system is learnt from Libuše's knowledge.

The prelude to our state history, the period before St Wenceslas, also calls for further consideration. For the question arises of what nation is actually concerned. I think that a quite independent and special amalgam, both ethnic and cultural, originated on our territory. The meeting and succession of Slav, Celtic and Germanic settlements, which sometimes has the character of a kind of assimilation, certainly led to the mutual penetration of these streams. A country which retains, despite further waves of settlement, so many Celtic place names, and which still bears the name of its Celtic inhabitants in its international designation, has evidently preserved other Celtic elements as well, which have entered its thought and culture indistinguishably but radically and for ever. The expressly Celtic elements in Czech mythology are important proof of this. But still more important is the history of the coming of Christianity to our country.

Let us leave aside the otherwise important fact that Christianity came to us through the ceaseless influence of neighbouring countries that were already Christian, and let us weigh once more the importance and results of the various missionary attempts on our territory. The first really successful mission here seems to have been the Irish-Scottish mission. Its success could be explained by the fact that these missionaries were able to link onto the remains of Celtic religious ideas and that they may in a sense have had an easier language situation, because their own language never sounded completely foreign. But the work of this mission was gradually hampered by the growing area of Franco-German influence on the south-west borders of the country. The missions sent from this area evidently came up against a number of problems, the most important of which was that they were closely connected with power-political influences. But at the same time it is quite possible that problems also arose because these missionaries had less feeling for local conditions, because they came from more widely differing cultural traditions.

What is certain is that the Great Moravian Prince Rostislav turned to Rome with the request of a country that was already Christian ('our nation has rejected paganism' the message says) and asked for priests who would spread Christ's teaching in a comprehensible language. Only some of the legends of Cyril and Methodius say expressly that he asked for priests who knew a Slavonic language. The arrival of Cyril and Methodius in Moravia, as all sources agree, was accompanied by an enthusiastic welcome. The closeness of the language and hence comprehensible exposition of the scriptures were incomparably pleasanter than the efforts of the Franco-German emissaries, and the Byzantine political influence was much less dangerous than the aggressive ambitions of direct neighbours. The description of the wonderful reception is followed in the legend with descriptions of the harsh procedure of the apostles against the remains of pagan customs, the felling of idols and holy trees. These holy trees may well have been relics of the Celtic cults. The missionaries from theologically refined Byzantium could not have proceeded otherwise. But these references are immediately followed by descriptions of quarrels. We know very well what the Frankish bishops, with their lust for property, were concerned with. All the same we might wonder what the basis was that made this scheming possible. For it may well be that the mission of Cyril and Methodius, despite the advantage of closeness of language, started to come up against serious differences in the content and understanding of the teaching, especially where native traditions were closer to those of the Irish-Scottish missionaries, who probably had a gentler touch and knew how to link on to earlier conditions more tactfully. Perhaps Cyril and Methodius did not behave like the first

apostles, but as firm defenders of orthodoxy. In a country that was, after all, still only just going over to the new religion, this may have evoked some distaste. It is also possible that as long as Cyril was alive, that philosopher with wide views and evidently broadminded tolerance, the dispute was held within tolerable bounds. But later, when Methodius remained alone, these disputes became much sharper. As a statesman with a legal and moralistic mind, Methodius awoke ever greater opposition, and this was more and more misused by the bishops inimical to him. Nevertheless the authority of the Velehrad archbishop was such that, as long as he was alive, he was able to defend his work and his rights. However, the fate of his pupils shows that in spite of their efforts, this form of Christianity did not succeed in taking permanent root in the country. It is not by chance that the culture of Cyril and Methodius achieved its greatest prosperity in Bulgaria, where there was no tension between the form and the content, such as we feel there was in Moravia.

The fundamental importance of Cyril and Methodius should not overshadow the other important roots of our national culture. The eastern mission, chiefly by introducing the liturgy in the native language, opened up the possibility of the development of independent native theological opinion. But this did not abolish Celtic influence. By an interplay of remarkable chances, Czech Christian mythology produced the legend of Blaník, which has so many motifs well known from the stories of King Arthur: in the depths of a mountain a sovereign awaits, surrounded by his faithful knights so that at the moment of direst need of the country he may ride out and with his almighty sword 'behead them all' to attain final victory. The name Blaník is probably of Celtic origin (compare 'Mont Blanc'). So we can see right at the beginning of Czech history, in the very foundations of our culture, the existence of that extreme tension that originates from the clash of various influences.

Even at this early time, then, our countries became the foundation stone of Europeanism, because here various regions, which were soon to be divided, came together and influenced each other. At first sight it certainly seems paradoxical when we say that the unity of Europe, which is divided by the Great Schism into East and West, remains preserved in the Czech lands, thanks to the fact that here, on its furthest edge, a tiny Czech community originated, cut off from its Celtic roots by the expansion of Franco-German power, and from its Byzantine-Slavonic cultural centre by the expansion of Hungarian power, and firmly defending its independence against German influence, which of course penetrates the country and brings much that is positive, as Palacký sees it, for the whole duration of Czech history. Bohemia is a place of intersection that originated before

Romanesque culture, which had linked up the whole of Europe including Russia, fell apart, and the West expressed itself in a new style, entirely separated from the East — the Gothic style. For clever observers do not fail to see correspondence between Romanesque arches of the West and the shape of the early Russian churches. As far as the art of architecture is concerned Bohemia is a Gothic land, but it is a rather peculiar Gothic, in which we find many a Byzantine ornamental element — in panel painting, in the agate-decorated walls of the St Wenceslas chapel, above the golden gate of Prague Cathedral and elsewhere.

So before Europeanism was constituted in the western sense of the word, by the happy simultaneous occurrence of the Emperor Charlemagne and Pope Gregory the Great, and long before Europeanism became a concept in the supra-national confrontation of Europe and the Orient during the crusades, and even long before the western world started to quote its Greek cultural heritage in Renaissance times, Bohemia and particularly Prague was a point of intersection of all the elements constituting European thought and culture, which is built — roughly speaking — on Greek knowledge, Hebrew religion and Roman statehood. There can be no doubt about the penetration of Greek and Roman influences, but in the community of Bohemian culture the important source represented by original Hebrew influence can also be clearly seen. This too is a forgotten and unresearched region. In the market places below Prague castle there were always, beside the Arab merchants, a number of Jewish merchants, and the continuity of the Prague ghetto lasted through the ages. The influence of this centre was then a powerful one. Let us recall only the Prague of Charles IV and Wenceslas IV, the importance of the ghetto in the intellectual ferment of Prague under the Emperor Rudolph, and then the Jewish authors at the end of the 19th, and beginning of the 20th centuries. It becomes clear that the origin of Europeanism was to be found in Bohemia long before Europe began, stage by stage, to be conscious of it.

It is altogether remarkable how Bohemia is able to accept and shape foreign influences and integrate foreign elements into its own tradition by building elements that correspond to them but are purely Czech. We would certainly be able to cite many examples, but let us just recall a certain Czech quality in the works of foreign architects of the Baroque period, or Mozart's relationship with Prague and his position in the history of Czech music. We could also use many remarkable examples of the same kind showing Czech-Spanish or Czech-Dutch relationships and influences.

Standing symbolically at the beginning of Czech history is the figure of the prince St Wenceslas. This figure has an absolute and undisputed

claim, because he is the embodiment of what is essentially Czech, of the answer to the Czech question. In Wenceslas we see clearly the three elements of Europeanism: he was a highly educated man, a man of deep religious life, and a ruler. It must be realised that these three components of Europeanism correspond to the three missions of Christ, to be a teacher, a priest and a king, and thus to demonstrate both the fullness of his humanity and the fullness of his Divine Sonship, which are one and the same. That dignity forming Christ's authority is of course born of the harmony of reverence and love of the Holy Ghost. The Son is respectful (and humble) towards the Father, the Father loves the Son and so they are one. All correct ordering of things is deduced from this mystery, and insight into it gives us the key to the problem of earthly authority, government, justice. Wenceslas represents for us a naturally good ruler and as such is accepted by the nation as the ruler of this land for ever.

His government is an expression of the proper orderliness that was instilled in him by Ludmila, his grandmother. So Wenceslas gained it from a woman representing the country, as Přemysl did before him. Wenceslas' ruling position is given by his having been born to it. This position is so natural that there is no need for it to be ensured by power in any way. Wenceslas' strength and authority are not supported by anything external, but come from what is his own, from learning and prayer, or if you like from knowledge and insight. Twice we see Wenceslas in this strength: first when, protected by the angels, he destroys the enemy without bloodshed; secondly when the Emperor despises him as useless and weak and is then at once obliged to go and welcome him as the most esteemed, because he sees the guardian angels in his train.

Wenceslas and the country are one. For Wenceslas is the prince who works in the vineyards and harvests the fields. He cultivates his country and serves it. He loves it and is respectful towards it. He is the one who benefits from it, taking bread for the life of the body and wine for the joy of the heart. The country gives them to him because it knows and loves his hard-working hand. It is the evident result of Wenceslas' work in the vineyards and in the fields that he is possessed by God's generosity. He is reverent to God and God protects him. Wenceslas, who knows the miracle invested in the root of the vine, who brings the juice of the grape from the rough soil, is necessarily the king, according to the order of Melchizedek, the king of peace. He cannot shed blood to water the earth. He would be doing the opposite of Christ's will, who turned wine into blood, if he were to turn blood, through earth and the vine, into wine.

Just as Wenceslas is related to the country, so is he related to the nation. The people see that the prince and the country are one and they honour and love him for it.

Wenceslas' government is born by service to the people and gratitude to God. Wenceslas carried bundles of wood to widows and erected churches so that in them he might, at the head of the people, thank the creator of all that is good and the teacher of love. In love for the country and reverence for God the nation and the prince are one. . .

(The author continues his survey of Czech history, contrasting periods when secular and religious rulers were at odds with one another and alienated from the people with periods when the ruler was the authentic 'voice of the Czech land'. The reign of Charles IV in the 14th century was one such period. *Ed.*)

It can be said that Charles raised Bohemia to a leading place in Europe. He devoted all his talent, learning, skill and diligence to building a centre of Europe in Prague. In this he was certainly the son of his father, who wanted to renew King Arthur's Round Table in Prague in a form that had already disappeared, in the spirit of the height of chivalry. Charles achieved what had brought his father failure and derision because the idea of St Wenceslas, inherited from his mother, circulated in his being. The weapon of the Czech land is not the sword, but knowledge. It is impossible to make the centre of a chivalrous world here. Let Prague be the centre of European learning. Prague University was to become, in Charles' conception, the round table of the knights of the spirit. Also the building of a bridge, which was not the first bridge in its place, but was stronger and wider, was an expression of Charles' knowledge of the importance of the place of which he was king. The majesty of Prague shone in the figure of Charles, and it was undoubtedly the crown of Gothic Europe. Included in the picture of this expression is the fact that Charles had the crown of St Wenceslas made, and built a famous chapel in reverence for the holy patron of the Czech land.

Charles' fame rests on the strengthening of three components of authority: the king, the archbishop and the newly independent authority of the University supported one another mutually. The relationship to the nation was established. The resemblance to the rule of the holy Prince Wenceslas appears extremely clearly. But the sharp-witted Charles could not fail to see that there was something not quite right. He did not get his code of laws accepted. His work was successful to the extent that it was an expression of the inner qualities of Bohemia. To the extent that his work was a construction of his human desires and was presented to the nation as his will, which the nation felt to be foreign, his work was unsuccessful. This is well

shown by Charles' bitterness and his later wise acceptance of the existing state of things in the story about the precious vine, which bore different grapes in Bohemia. The bitter wine born of the precious vine was the fact that in the Prague that Charles had quite systematically built up as the eternal seat of the kingdom, that he had surrounded with fortifications, decorated with churches, and to which he brought the bodies of protective saints, there was raised against him the voice of a dirty prophet, who dared to stand up against the king and establish a community of believers who were recruited from the prostitutes and dregs of the city, whose house he called Jerusalem, to express the fact that he kept his distance from Charles' work, as from Babylon and the work of the Antichrist. . .

(The relative harmony achieved under Charles was again dissipated after his death. 'Chaos of lawlessness' ensued. *Ed.*)

From the crisis, in which a new age of Czech history was born, from the fall of authority, the self-awareness of the nation rose up in the figure of Jan Hus. Hus is indisputably a symbolic figure and is understood by the nation as such. But what sort of symbol is he? Czech! Hus is an expression of the urgent need to find authority where there is none. For the whole of his life Hus was manoeuvring, searching for the powerful support of someone who would help bring about his not very original ideas on putting things to rights. At this time too he made the proud mistake of overrating Czech thought and refusing the life-giving whirl of ideas that raced through the heart of Europe. The Kutna Hora Decree, so much praised by the nation, which Hus achieved with a skill bordering on deceit, degraded the University from an important world centre of thought to a provincial school. Right at the end of his life he realised that he was absolutely without protection and, beaten down to his knees, he saw that the only thing left to him was his own inner strength, his conviction, his bare existence. The greatness of this lies in the fact that, in this situation, he stopped manoeuvring and appealed, in the name of faithfulness to himself, against all authority, to the judgement of God. Here Hus is the symbol of the emancipation of man from any kind of partial authority, however firmly established. With the death of Hus the problem of Truth appears on the scene of Czech history, the right of man to Truth, its defence as a defence of oneself. In the figure of Hus, disappearing in the flames, something royally free and spiritual shone forth. Not to see in that picture the royal dignity of man that belongs to him when he proves his loyalty to his convictions and the fulfilment of the task entrusted to him, is simply blindness.

At the moment when Hus defended the right of man to his own convictions and appealed to the sovereign authority of his own conscience, he became the highest representative of the nation, who

has no alternative after the fall of all authority but to find it within himself. The inner need to cling to something found its symbol in Hus and its ideal expression in the conception of Truth. The nation splendidly defended its independence against all in reverence and love for this authority. The idea is entirely mistaken that the Hussites were just rough people, with whom the established foreign authority fought against Czech independence. They were defeated because they fought against a nation that was in essence royal, free and powerful, that raised the necessary representatives of state authority from its inner forces in the form of Žižka and his lieutenants, of pastoral authority in the form of preachers, of teaching authority in the form of non-institutional meditation over the text of the Bible, that so much surprised the papal nuncio Eneas Silvio. It should be remembered that remarkable expressions of statehood and lawfulness appeared in this great rise of our national self-awareness, such as for instance Žižka's military discipline or the Tábor rules of order.

It might seem that the nation found in Hus' Truth the solution to its situation. In the invincible army of the warriors of God that is even so. But it was only a flash, a dream, as was the glory of Charles' Bohemia. It soon became clear that Hus' demand for Truth had its shadow. For this demand cannot be objectively defined, its fulfilment cannot be proved. Hus' Truth dragged with it a terrible inner uncertainty and in its projection distrust of others and public uncertainty. Who can reach that ideal, who can be believed without reservation? The desperation that was one day to seize the noble Lutherans entered through the ideally clear figure of Hus into the entire Czech consciousness. Since his death no saintly figure has arisen in Bohemia, because no one can attain the criterion of perfection. In the same way we are again and again witnesses of the feeling of uncertainty of ourselves and uncertainty as to whether to give our voice and our arms to him who appears as a possible leader. It is typical that George of Poděbrady, certainly a great man, who is a symbol of the fact that the nation can produce a king from its ranks, and who at the same time showed that he was a different kind of king, when as the first in Europe he spoke of the need for a peaceful solution of international quarrels, did not dare to found a dynasty. And this distrust and uncertainty constantly grew, till it led the nation to the defeat of the Battle of the White Mountain and to the definite end of all hope when Valdštejn was murdered in Cheb, being in the end, despite all his apparent success and energy, hesitant and uncertain of himself.

We see in the events of the White Mountain the same fall that we saw at the time of Charles. The sons of the Hussites were not able to keep up the democratic dream of self-administration — something so

typical of the Renaissance, which is said to have passed us by — because they had no one to represent it with a ruler's authority. That borrowed puppet Friedrich of the Palatinate could not, of course, play this fundamental role in the organism of the nation.

Precisely this time, when the nation was slipping into misfortune, shows clearly how the life of Bohemia is not just a Bohemian affair.

Many people make the mistake of narrowing the issue down to the problem of the definition of the Czech nation in terms of language. If one does so, it is very easy to overlook the importance of Prague on the eve of the Thirty Years' War. At that time a break was occurring all over Europe between the Middle Ages and the New Age. New thought was rising, new culture, a new age. At the very beginning of these events Prague rose up as an important market place of the new goods — ideas. The court of the eccentric Emperor Rudolph, who was king of Bohemia, concentrated the cream of scholars and artists. Prague became the most bizarre gathering of people, a place where, beside a brilliant troupe of swindlers, alchemist charlatans and lying astrologers lived Kepler, Tycho Brahe, Jesenius, men who were marking out the foundations of the thought of the New Age. Jewish philosophers were working in Prague, and the great symbols of the terrible and all-surpassing forces that characterise modern science were known to everyone in Prague. People still point out today the house of Dr Faust, and legend (though considerably younger) relates that the parchment that brought Golem to life rolled away and got lost in Rudolph's Prague. And thus Prague on the threshold of the New Age, the age of reason, had just the role it had on the threshold of the Middle Ages, the age of belief: that of a market place. Rudolph's Prague demonstrates clearly that the heart of Europe can hardly be imagined elsewhere.

In this time of unbounded misery, when the Czech nation seemed to be dying, another of the symbolic phenomena of our history appeared on the scene — Jan Comenius. Although we did not succeed in finding either an authority of royal power, or an authority of priestly power, there grew up somehow by itself a new teaching authority. It grew from the need, which cannot be satisfied by a mere institution, to understand oneself, if one is to be supported by one's own truth. Hus' demand to stand firm in recognised truth appeared in the chaotic times of the 17th century in the form of Comenius' demand to defend one's own heart, for all that is external is only theatre, a labyrinth in which we lose our way. It is painfully paradoxical that this man, who bore the centre of certainty within himself, was hounded by the powerful, who beat the nation from which he came into a diaspora, and which he most significantly describes as a nation that had lost its way. Comenius, the truest 'I' (*'Selbst'*) of our nation, shows how a

rightly ordered world must be built on a rightly ordered heart which — thanks be to God — comes into the world unspoilt and with an embryonic sign of balance, and a rightly formed heart must be protected and strengthened by the appropriate order of all things civic and legal. But Comenius as an old man disappears abroad like a shadow. The Czech nation is knocked down, whipped out of the country and scattered in foreign lands, beheaded, in the figure of Jesenius, who is among the most important links between our own and the Slovak nation; even its tongue was cut out. This nation had no rights or even justification, its last testament was written. This nation was hardly able to enter the New Age that was opening. Strange: a nation living in a landscape that we have recognised as basically Baroque should die on the very threshold of the Baroque period.

The post-White Mountain period of Czech history has come to be known as the Age of Darkness. If we are to understand fully what this age meant, we must give more serious consideration to the meaning of 'darkness'. Darkness is night. Night is that depth from which days come, in which, sunk in the depths of sleep, we have dreams that free the depths of our consciousness from the confinement of our will and reason; night is the time when. . . the dazzling single sun disappears and we can see the stars. . . The age of darkness is for the Czech nation the time when it works in hiding towards a new birth. . .

(The author goes on to consider the principle that man must seek his own 'Truth', referring to Jan Hus and St John of Nepomuk as abiding symbols of this search, and concluding that this principle survived the disappearance of Czech independence. *Ed.*)

In the age of darkness, when the nation had to face the intervention of unwelcome foreign powers, it was forced to find support in the heritage of Hus, in its own conviction. It is tragic that it could not build up its convictions in the context of the learning of the New Age. The nation. . . suffered from complete lack of education. The more it was thrust into ignorance to the point where even its national language was taken from it, the more a new symbolic figure took shape, a figure who became perhaps the best known representative of Bohemia in the world, the figure of Josef Švejk. ('Good Soldier Schweik').

Josef Švejk is one of the symbols of the Czech nation, the Czechs are a nation of Švejks. It would be a mistake to deny this fact but suicide to accept it. Švejk is undoubtedly the figure to which, under external pressures, Czech greatness gradually degenerated, yet he is a figure which, for all its superficiality, has its greatness. Švejk is in his way a royal figure, conscious of his convictions. Švejk cannot be ruled. Švejk cannot be fooled, and you cannot indoctrinate him. Švejk is an accusation of the modern scientifically enlightened machinery of state power. He is a symbol of triumphantly surviving simple human

nature. Švejk is the figure against which it is possible to measure the absurdity and unnaturalness of the New Age state system. So he is the bearer of the great victory of humanity and individuality over totalitarianism, uniformity and any kind of '-ism' produced by power. Švejk is a man of balanced calm. The Czech Josef Švejk is a great teacher of survival where the external conditions restrict life or make it impossible through absurd definitions. As such he is accepted and admired by soldiers of all modern armies, citizens of totalitarian states, etc.

But the art of survival is not the art of living. Švejk does not know how to live in the positive sense of the word. Švejk's greatness is provided by the complete degeneration of positive Czech greatness. His calm is Comenius' paradise of the heart degenerated to absolute indifference; Hus' strength of his own convictions fallen upon unwavering stupidity. Royal dignity is changed into servile eagerness which through a clownish paradox convicts the master of total incapability. Josef Švejk is the educated and just Bohemian king bewitched to become an amoral fool. The whole world despises this creature, though he is popular all over the world. There is a dreadful danger that the popularity of Švejk in his homeland will make him a model of the only correct behaviour. There is a danger that Švejk will become a Cinderella who no longer has a dream of greatness, a Cinderella not bewitched but cursed, a sly Cinderella, calculating, bad, that revolting little Czech mannikin who spends his life complaining, in envy, shame-faced rejection and resentment.

Luckily, beside ambiguous Švejkish behaviour, mortally dangerous for a free, self-confident Bohemia, we see the essence of the Czech nation developing in another direction too. This is a development from the seeds sown by Comenius. The Czech national revival also involves a revival of education. It is natural and understandable that a nation deprived of the possibilities of raising an independent royal or priestly authority raises its teaching authority. . . From the line leading to condemned vegetating Švejks there branches off the hopeful line of thinking Czechs, represented by Palacký, Havlíček, Masaryk. This living line, leading in the end to the ruling authority, has a parallel in the line leading towards the priestly authority. It should be stressed that Švejk was not the only Czech who challenged the bureaucratic machine of Austria, but also — and triumphantly — Klement Marie Hofbauer, and that the birth of Czech independence was blessed by two bishops who are considered as saints, Podlaha and Stojan. One may certainly smile at the coincidence, but in considering the symbolism of Czech history their names cannot be overlooked. (The names mean 'floor' and 'stand' respectively — *Trans.*) A floor is the base on which everything stands, a stand something firm that can

support everything, on which things may be laid and raised. It is good to notice that in the modern independent state, despite all the journalistic duels and passionate popular campaigns for destroying statues, during the St Wenceslas millennium the Protestant and the Catholic traditions resounded in harmony. The whole nation rejoiced in the completion of the building of the main cathedral of the country, St Vitus cathedral, opened by Bishop Podlaha, who was devoted to the cause of the nation, just as the whole nation bowed in respect before the decree of the President of the Republic which ordered that on the day of St Wenceslas a guard of the Czech army should stand at his memorial and so pay homage to its princely protector. When we look back at the celebrations of the Wenceslas millennium we find Czech statehood truly renewed in them. . .

When we consider Czech history in this way we see that the great task that has been entrusted to this nation in the heart of Europe is to seek for and express just statehood and to be the teacher of wisdom. We see too that whenever we have not been faithful to this task we have fallen into contumely proportionate to the prestige that emerges from the mission of Bohemia. . . Even when Bohemia falls into the greatest oblivion and is completely without influence or importance, its mission secretly lives on, and it is a place where foreigners consciously or unconsciously make their pilgrimage to seek and find the answer to their deepest questions. In quiet, unostentatious Prague foreign visitors find a strange calmness and knowledge of their own culture, they find here a reference point according to which they can determine their own stature, position and attitude. The feeling that seizes everyone, and that they rather inarticulately express when they speak of the view of the city as they walk over Charles Bridge, has its justification. It is not just a matter of the essence of European culture that comes from the architecture of Prague, layered by long tradition. Crossing Charles Bridge with its statue of John of Nepomuk somehow draws attention to the transience of human life, but also to its transcendence. The continuity of the life of this historic city gives people a consciousness of their past and directly forces on them its forgotten depths, and the mighty silhouette of Hradčany castle testifies that from the foundations they have seen in it, majesty may rise. Visitors to Prague and the people of Prague themselves feel here a strange comfort of rising hope. There is something firm and certain here, from which it is possible to set out.

It is certainly interesting that in the numerically small group of Bohemian saints all the basic archetypes of the ordering of families and states are represented. It is as if here a blessing and transcendence had been given to everything that forms the life of an individual, founds the community of a family and the organism of a nation.

There clearly appear in the group of Bohemian saints the figures of the ruler, the judge, the knight, the priest, the farmer, the teacher, the worker. . . and in the same way family roles and relationships: grandmother — grandson, brothers, the mother. . .

The holy existence of Bohemia not only surrounds us, but also forms us within, because we are each of us a sprig of the same Czech family tree. In our happy years of childhood, when everything is clear, we know this with the whole of our being. Our childish dreams and ideas are much more real than we allow ourselves as adults to admit. At times when we have not been impoverished by not being able to hear the stories of the holy saints of our past, we have lived with them in complete intimacy. There was nothing impossible for us in working in the vineyard or the field with Prince Wenceslas, or feeling the presence of the dear Lady Zdislava when we picked camomile or dried lime flowers. At every step we recognised the national saints in the noble qualities of people who formed our family circle.

When later as adults we lose this childish trust, we begin to feel awkward and somehow strange. It is not by chance that our national anthem starts with the desperate question 'Where is my home?' We feel we are losing our home although we are standing in our own country. When we are grown up we acquire a different relationship to the national saints and we turn to them in prayer. What is this prayer essentially? It is more than intercession: it is the spontaneous self-expression of our soul.

#### *A Note from the Author*

The present article is a shortened version of the concluding chapter of a book devoted to the Czech saints. I wrote this book between 1975 and 1985, at a time when Czech culture was facing increasing danger. The totalitarian regime was in the process of destroying not only our national identity and our spiritual life but even the cultural and moral context in which we lived.

In these circumstances, I wanted to draw attention to individuals from Czech history who provided continuity in our national life and whose actions contributed to shaping patterns of behaviour which are now imprinted in the social memory. Saints such as the good king Wenceslas, the great bishop Adalbert, the grandmother and teacher Ludmila and the gentle nurse Agnes of Přemyslid are depicted from several points of view — historical, legendary, psychological — so that the significance of each as archetype and symbol becomes apparent.

Other figures who are not saints are also important in the formation of Bohemia's spiritual tradition. I therefore provide shorter portraits of Jan Hus, Comenius and other figures who are venerated but not officially canonised. I also include some material about foreign saints who lived in Bohemia and, conversely, saints of Czech origin who spent their lives abroad.

My book is an essay in cultural sociology and my aim is to provide an integrated picture of the spiritual personality of the Czech nation.